

“What God Desires,” by Rev. Mark Caggiano, 6/7/2026

Hosea 5:15-6:6; Matthew 9:9-13

*For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.*

In the Book of Hosea, we are hearing something new. New in the scheme of the Bible because obviously this was written long ago. God wants steadfast love, not sacrifices. God wants the knowledge of God, not burnt offerings. God does not want the things that have been offered for centuries. God wants something else, something new.

Steadfast love, meaning the steady and consistent love of God. “Knowledge of God” is an odd phrase, but it means essentially the same thing as steadfast love. To know God is to accept what God is asking of us and to know God is to love God.

The reading from the Gospel follows a similar theme, but it is set in the context of Jesus’ teachings. Jesus was born centuries after Hosea, so these lessons are not new. But they were clearly not followed. Why not? Because actual sacrifices made at the Temple remain the central expectation of religious life.

In the Gospel passage, Jesus is hanging out with some sinners around his dinner table. And the Pharisees, who are essentially the morality police of the era, they have a few bones to pick with Jesus. *“Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?”* Why does a supposedly holy man choose his company so poorly—this is a not very subtle dig at Jesus as seen through the strict religious viewpoint of the Pharisees. How does Jesus respond?

*“Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”*

You do not try to heal people who are not sick. Jesus questions their understanding of who is really in need of help. And Jesus repeats the language of the prophet Hosea, language that the Pharisees not doubt remember. To be fair, the Pharisees were typically more in line with this way of thinking, unlike the other group of priests called the Sadducees who were focused on performing the rituals and sacrifices to the exclusion of all else.

Hosea lived in the north, in the Kingdom of Israel, during a time when the people were turning away from the exclusive worship of God. Not only were they faithless, their moral and ethical behavior was sliding away from what was expected. They weren’t doing the right things.

Hosea’s prophecy was intended to remind the people of what God expected of them. It was to bring them back into compliance with the covenant. But looking back over the many centuries of Biblical history, it might be difficult to pinpoint what that covenant included from time to time. The Ten Commandments might pop to mind, but the Law of Moses was far more complicated. By one count, there are 613 commandments to be followed. That’s a busy week.

And this long list was not always in effect – it grew over time. Think back to the Book of Genesis. Israel does not yet exist. Abraham himself is not even “Jewish” in any recognizable sense. He was a worshipper of Yah, the god of his tribe who would eventually be known as the God of Abraham. But during Abraham’s life, there was a relatively small group of his kinfolk who devoted themselves to worshipping this particular god.

And we know that sacrifices were expected back then. The grim story of the Binding of Isaac reminds us that God momentarily asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son. There are other passages in the Bible that declare that human sacrifice is a sin, but that is noteworthy. You needed to tell people not to do

something, meaning it had been done at various times. The account of Abraham and Isaac may have been offered as the final word against that past practice.

And so, Abraham sacrificed a ram instead. Animal sacrifices were normal. This was the case for centuries. But then there are moments when even that tradition is drawn into question. We have the example of Hosea, but he may have been restating a point rather than starting a new rule.

In the Book of Hosea, the translation I read from uses the term *loving kindness*. In other versions, the word is translated as *mercy*. This ties in with the word used by Jesus in our Gospel passage, but are these the same thing? In Hosea, the idea is to stay within the existing covenant. But with Jesus, there seems to be an extra step, or at least a broader understanding.

This version spoken by Jesus was probably made in light of a famous passage from the Book of Micah: *what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

The King James Version uses the word “mercy,” while other translations sometimes use “kindness.” Mercy and kindness are being equated. Is that how we would interpret those words?

Mercy is an unearned act. No one deserves mercy. Mercy is offered in response to some bad act, some form of sin. Kindness seems broader, more about generally helping someone. It is not an assessment of circumstances or moral culpability. Mercy and kindness are both gifts, but mercy comes with a dose of shame. Bad people get mercy. Anyone can receive kindness.

Over time and across the many centuries of the Bible, what the people were expected to do changed. There are moments when the prophets remind the people to follow God’s commands, or what God wants. But what God wants is not consistent. I’ll say that a bit differently: *what we are told that God wants has changed over time.*

For example, no one ever complains that we need to go back to the good old days of Abraham. Why? Because pretty much none of the Biblical rules applied to Abraham. The covenant established between God and Abraham was specific and limited. God agreed to give Abraham many descendants and all the land from the Nile River to the Euphrates River. The Book of Genesis later adds a condition to this agreement, this covenant, that all male descendants of Abraham must be circumcised. That was new. Besides this one sign of the covenant, many rules about things you shall and shall not do would not be created until the lifetime of Moses, hundreds of years later.

A covenant is an agreement. The agreement with Abraham was limited. More was given by God than was required by God in return. The covenant with Moses comes around far later and it is more complicated. Over time, that first set of laws expanded far beyond the Ten Commandments. And I would remind you that modern Christians do not follow these laws. Why not, you might ask?

When you connect the dots from Hosea to Micah, from Micah to Jesus, you will see a significant change in emphasis. First, you were supposed to offer animal sacrifices, but then you were not. Instead, God wants the people to behave in certain ways. To follow a simple covenant according to Hosea: to perform acts of loving kindness. Or as Micah suggests, to offer mercy.

Jesus follows this same pattern. He shifts the emphasis away from the many, many rules of the Law of Moses. He does not however abolish those rules outright, like Paul and the Apostles later did. Where do Paul and the Apostles get the authority to cancel all those rules? Good question.

The early church leaders pinned a lot of emphasis on a passage from the Gospel of Matthew: *“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* So, the leaders had the authority to set the agenda, to make the rules, and perhaps to break the rules.

The early Christian church still had rules, rules everyone was supposed to follow. At first everyone was supposed to be celibate. No one gets married, no one has children. Why? Because the world was coming to an end. That set of rules did not last, obviously, because the world kept on going. The church eventually developed new traditions. These rules were sometimes copied and sometimes they replaced aspects of the old laws. The rules could be and were changed by the church when it was thought necessary or convenient.

For example, divorce was never supposed to be allowed, because Jesus said so. This led to the idea of an annulment. The church created a whole new system for explaining why an annulment does not equal a divorce. It is an annulment, a negation, because there was never a true marriage. And there was a list of reasons. It was a forced marriage. It was never intended by one party to be an exclusive arrangement.

Of course, those same reasons existed when Jesus said that divorce was never acceptable. But the church took its authority to bind heaven and earth quite seriously, even over the objections of Jesus.

Such uses of power strayed into abuses, into hypocrisy. And tensions over this double standard led to the Protestant Reformation. Many Protestants would decide that God does not desire certain behaviors from the people. God desires their faith and *only* their faith.

Faith would become the sole basis for the covenant with God and the sole basis for salvation from God. God is the source of all mercy, forgiving our sinful natures. And this is one way of distinguishing Protestants and Catholics, these expectations about behavior.

Let's think for a moment: does God *need* anything? Anything from us? Anything at all? If we operate under the assumption that God is the creator of everything, why would God have need of anything from us given that everything already belongs to God in some sense. We can't *give* God anything.

What about our behavior? How should we order our behavior, if at all? How should we live our lives in the spirit of God?

Over the years, I have read a lot of philosophy. Philosophy is by one definition the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. Philosophy is one way of considering the world around us.

Philosophy can be about logical propositions, basically questions. It can be about fundamental questions leading to various conclusions. That does not mean that philosophy is always logical or that it always leads to logical conclusions. But the good thing about philosophy is that it requires you to be disciplined. It is not quite like mathematics, but if your philosophy cannot be followed along like mathematics, there is little chance that anyone new will sign on to it.

One philosopher I have turned to over the years is John Rawls. He was a political philosopher, meaning he thought about how politics should work, what assumptions we should make or not make. And one fundamental assumption Rawls made was that *fairness* should be at the core of politics. Fairness is pretty much everything. And to further that focus, he came up with an idea. It was a thought experiment. It was called the *veil of ignorance*.

Imagine everyone somehow existed before we were all born into the world, behind this veil of ignorance. We know nothing about what our lives will be like after we are born. And at that preliminary moment, we are asked how everything should be organized. Not who we will be, mind you, but how society will function.

We do not know how or where or even when we will be born. We do not know if we will be rich or poor, healthy or sickly. We do not know our gender, our race, our ethnicity. We know nothing about us or each other.

But behind this veil, we know that what we bind in heaven, so to speak, will be bound on earth. How then should we organize our world, our society, our ways of behaving? If we do not know anything, I guess the best choice would be to make everything as fair as possible.

This is like asking children to divide up a cake. The first child gets to cut the cake but will then be the last one to *choose* a slice of cake. Logic suggests that this child would divide the cake into perfectly equal slices. That way, everyone gets their fair share while the first one does not miss out.

How would that process work inside society, right now? What would people decide to achieve the fairest outcome?

Do we right now require everyone to share things equally? Not really. Do we allow for some differences, but make sure that everyone has enough to live on, a minimum standard for living? Enough to eat and drink, a decent place to live, a chance to find purpose in life? Again, that is not the case.

As you might guess, this proposed system is not how we run the world. There are greater inequities than this philosophy of fairness might allow. But the idea that society should be based on a sense of fairness is appealing. What might that look like if we applied it to our society?

Everyone would have the right to clean water. By the way, that is not true right now. You must pay for water. And if you do not have money to pay, no more water.

Everyone would have access to enough food. Again, that is not the case in the United States. During the past year, for example, four out of ten people in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts were food insecure, meaning they did not have enough food on hand at some point during the last year. Twenty five percent of people in Massachusetts commonly must skip meals or go hungry because they do not have enough money. *Twenty five percent.*

There are food pantries, yes, but they are charities funded by the kindness of others. Charity is not a right and it is not a certainty. And sometimes, they run out.

What about housing? What about healthcare? What about transportation? What about all that? There are no rights to any of those. So, people are homeless. People get sick. And people cannot travel where they need to go.

The United States has an economic system in place that relies upon each person earning their own way. That does not mean you will be able to afford to pay for all those items, like food and water, like housing or healthcare. That right to earn your own way also assumes a decent paying job exists in a place near enough for you to get there.

There is a terribly limited social safety. Social security only applies if you meet the age requirements or become disabled, but it is based on what you already paid into the system. Transitional assistance is available only for those very few who qualify, which by that name “transitional” assumes it is limited assistance timewise. Honestly, if you are between the ages of 18 and 62, there is little help available.

Why do we have a system like this? Because we want to make sure that people who can work will work. Even if they have trouble finding work. Even if there is no work. And the little help available is often conditioned in ways that are at times mean-spirited. Do we want our nation to be mean-spirited?

Think back to the changing list of Biblical expectations. Over time, the religious outlook shifted. When Hosea was calling out to the people, it was because they were not taking care of those in need in their society. The rich were getting richer and the poor were getting poorer. Sound familiar.

Hosea was crying out about unfairness and was calling the people back to fairness, to kindness, to mercy. Fairness to one another. Kindness for those in need. Mercy even when people were not deemed worthy by some method or measure.

This is the same message from Jesus. He was sitting with the sinners. They were not worthy by some measure of righteousness, but they are still at the table with Jesus.

What would we do if we discovered that our next-door neighbor was hungry? If their water has been cut off? If they are too sick or too frail to work or to care for themselves? What would we do? What *should* we do?

Of course, we probably know them a bit. That may mean it is easier to help them. It may mean that, but it might not result in that. And we also know that there are people in our country, in our state, in our city or town that need help. What should we do about that?

I am going to propose a thought experiment of my own. Imagine we are sitting behind John Rawls' veil of ignorance. We are being asked to set up the world. But this time, we are being asked to write down a covenant. A covenant between God and the people of the world.

In this covenant, God will give us one and only one thing: the entire world. We have to figure everything else. We are on our own. How to feed ourselves. How to stay warm. How to do anything and everything. How should that agreement look?

Because, to be honest with you all, that *is* how it works. How the whole world works. We basically make up all the rules as we go along. Some of those rules are old. Some of those rules are new. And some of those rules change from time to time. Every single rule about how humans behave is made up by us.

Those rules are frequently organized in ways to protect those in power, like the kings of Israel. Hosea tried to change their minds, but that does not mean that they listened. Bear in mind their kingdom of Israel was conquered and disappeared from the map for thousands of years.

We have our own set of rules. Rules as Americans. Rules as citizens of Massachusetts. Rules as residents of a city or town. We make up all *those* rules. And we can change those rules under certain circumstances.

Should it be legally permissible under those various rules for people to starve, to go thirsty, to be unable to find a place to live? Because it is that way right now.

We can also make rules about how we are to respond to such situations, as people of faith. Of course, we can change the civil laws, but we can also consider how we want the world to be as religious folks dedicated to our way of being.

Is that way of living going to be Biblical? Is that way in keeping with the teachings of Jesus? Yet again, we might need to change our rules. Because our present set of civil rules are not in harmony with the Bible or the teachings of Jesus. Not even close.

We have the right to set down in our covenant with God how we expect each other to act. How we expect the world to look, at least in the corner of the world within our control. What would we set down in that covenant of our making? What would we promise God that we are going to do?

Would it be about having faith and nothing else? Would it be about strict moral behavior, with many shalls and shall nots? Would it be about how we are supposed to treat one another? *For that which you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do unto me.* And if our covenant is about loving one

another, what will *love* look like in practice? What will loving kindness and mercy look like in this promise we are making?

I do not have an answer for you this morning. Consider this your homework for summer vacation. May God bless you with sunshine and gentle weather. And may we offer to one another loving kindness and gentle mercies always. Amen.