

### *Justice, Mercy, and Walking*

**Micah 6:1-8** Hear what the LORD is saying: Arise, lay out the lawsuit before the mountains; let the hills hear your voice! <sup>2</sup> Hear, mountains, the lawsuit of the LORD! Hear, eternal foundations of the earth! The LORD has a lawsuit against his people; with Israel he will argue. <sup>3</sup> "My people, what did I ever do to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! <sup>4</sup> I brought you up out of the land of Egypt; I redeemed you from the house of slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam before you. <sup>5</sup> My people, remember what Moab's King Balak had planned, and how Balaam, Beor's son, answered him! Remember everything from Shittim to Gilgal, that you might learn to recognize the righteous acts of the LORD! <sup>6</sup> With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? <sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit? <sup>8</sup> He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

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Every week the prayer of the people includes some expression of the concepts of doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Why? And, come to think of it, what does that mean, exactly?

The Bible and its message are simple and complicated...both at the same time. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" is a simple rule. How you apply that rule, how you live it, can get complicated. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt 22:36-39 CEB) These are simple rules. Implementing these into your life requires a lot of thought, time, and wisdom.

The prophet Micah lived between 700 to 800 B. C. It had been two hundred or more years since the heyday of King David and King Solomon. The kings and their governments had become more and more corrupt and oppressive. In that time and place, Micah was called to bring God's message. The passage begins with the prophet Micah announcing that God is going to lay charges against the nation of Israel. The very hills and mountains are called on to be witnesses to this drama set in the language of a lawsuit by God against Israel.

Then, beginning in verse three, God speaks. What did I ever do to you? Have I done something to make you tired of me? I rescued you from Egypt. I liberated you from slavery. I gave you great leaders in Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The tone is not so much righteous anger and accusation as it is one of frustration. God doesn't curse or damn the nation for their actions. Instead, God seems bewildered. I've done great things for you and yet you've ignored and forgotten me! And God implores them to remember.

Then in verse six, the people respond. What should I bring so that I may approach the Lord? Burnt offerings of calves? Sacrifices of a thousand rams? Huge quantities of oil? Should I sacrifice my first born child for my sins? It sounds like the people are really contrite. They seem to be desperately trying to figure out how to get right with God! And all of the ideas that they raise are about being willing to pay a huge fine for their sins and making sure they're worshipping correctly. They seem to be saying, "I'm on my way to the temple right now, Lord! What sort of penalty and how much do I have to pay in the form of sacrifices?"

They're so desperate to appease God, they even offer to sacrifice the most valuable thing they have – their children. Offering their children shows just how disconnected they have been from God. Human sacrifice was forbidden by God in Leviticus chapters 18 (18:21) and 20 (20:2-6), Deuteronomy chapters 12 (12:31) and 18 (18:9-11), by Jeremiah in chapter 19 (19:5), and Ezekiel chapter 16 (20:20-23).

We expect God's answer to go something like this: Okay, offer 12 calves per family, with a late fee of seven rams, a nuisance tax of two rams, and a recording fee of two large urns of olive oil to catch up all of the bookkeeping. Additional fees may be incurred if payment isn't received by thirty days after harvest. Go read the law and the prophets and don't insult me with the offer of human sacrifice again!

In the next verse the prophet Micah delivers God's actual response. "He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." Here is one of those simple but complex passages. Here is another place where what God expects of us fits in a nutshell. This is what is good. This is what God requires. Notice that this isn't breaking news. God has told you. You've been told, and now you are being reminded. And it's interesting that Israel isn't addressed directly. This declaration is aimed at all mankind, "God has told you, you mortals, what is good and required."

There's no fee schedule for various sins. There's no payment plan for when various sacrifices and offerings are due. There's no accounting system established for recording bad deeds versus worship attendance. No scorecard. Mechanistic payment is meaningless. The Lord does not require the sacrifice of things – you can't buy your way into God's favor. All that is required are three attitudes, three modes of living.

One of them is to walk humbly with God. A lot of the time we aren't too good at the humble part. Humility isn't held up as a great asset in our culture. But Micah tells we are to walk humbly – carefully, wisely – with God. Humbly means not being so sure that we know all the answers. Humbly includes wisely and that means we are to be aware that we have more questions than we do answers. For centuries the people of Israel were sure that burnt offerings were an important key to being right with God. Being so sure was a recipe for being mistaken. Micah is saying that sacrifices aren't the point. Walking humbly with God is the goal.

We can get so sure about what we want that we become sure that is what God wants, too. Some people are sure that God requires that we worship twice on Sunday and on Wednesday night. Some of us are sure that God wants pipe organ music; others are certain that God wants us to sing praise music with our hands up in the air. Some are pretty sure that we must pray to God in King James English; others are pretty sure God speaks Chinese, Farsi, and Swahili. The writer of Genesis was sure that women were made to be helpers to men. The Apostle Paul said that women were meant to be deacons, teachers, and apostles. We need to be careful about being sure. Being certain can quickly lead to failing to listen to the Spirit, to no longer asking questions, to no longer seeking and learning. Being sure can cause spiritual death.

Isn't it interesting that we aren't told to humbly believe, but to humbly walk. Believing can be rather passive, but walking is an active image. We think that Jesus said "believe" me, but the invitation that was most characteristic of Jesus was "follow me." What is involved in walking, in the sense that it is often used in scripture? Back in the fourth chapter, Micah talked about how walking in God's paths came as the result of instruction. It involved being taught, it came from learning. Those lessons were about how to live with each other and live for God.

Walking with God means more than just coming to worship. If all of the instruction you receive is the sermon on Sunday, that's a pretty lean diet, a very short walk. I commend to you the adult education opportunities of Sunday school, Companions in Christ, Thursday night studies, POYC, Women's Bible study Circles, personal devotionals during Advent and Lent, and private reading and study.

In Hebrew the word for ethics is *halacha* which means "walking." Your walk in life is the ethics by which you act. Sometimes we stumble and fall, meaning that we fail to act ethically. To walk with God is to live by God's ethics. That isn't something to do in a presumptuous way, but rather something to attempt carefully, wisely, humbly and based on careful study.

Integral to walking with God is to do justice. Justice isn't an idea, a concept, or a system. Justice is something that you **do**. We almost always think of justice as a legal system that punishes crime. The word means so much more in scripture. Justice is about change and transformation. It isn't only about punishing the oppressor; it's also about lifting up the oppressed! Justice is about establishing or restoring community. Too often we live in a neighborhood, but there's no feeling of community.

Justice is a major theme in the book of Micah. Chapters two and three speak of unjust foreclosures of land and housing, the oppression of homeowners and families, the circumstances that force the breakup of families and the potential and future denied to children. Micah speaks of courts and governments corrupted by money and gifts, of religious leaders who are blinded by prosperity. He speaks of those who get ahead by force and oppressing those who reject war. In Micah, justice includes removing the obstacles to stable communities, strong families, and personal well-being.

The other attribute that is specified is loving kindness. The Hebrew word here is *hesed*, which means love, an especially strong and broad form of love. It is loyal love, constant love, merciful love, steadfast love. This is love that goes far beyond words. It is expressed in action, and not just in occasional acts, but in a very way of life, a life defined by compassionate work.

Sometimes there's tension between justice and kindness – especially when we think of justice in terms of retribution and punishment. We want people to get the punishment they deserve and loving kindness sounds like being wishy-washy, being soft on crime. People may deserve punishment – but they also deserve rehabilitation, training, counseling, and the opportunity to change and live better lives. If prisons are just warehouses for criminals, then what comes out of the system is most likely to be exactly what went in to prison, but enhanced by further indoctrination by fellow criminals. We have no right to expect someone's behavior to be improved by isolation, unemployment, and branding as incorrigible when they are released from prison. Justice that isn't tempered by love will slide into anger, hate, and brutality.

Family relationships and community relationships based only on justice will not work. They'll be dysfunctional unless justice is conditioned by mercy. If all you ever did was punish your children for the mistakes they made, how do you think they would turn out? It's a scary thought. If all God did was punish us when we messed up, not only when we did something wrong, but also when we failed to do the right thing by doing nothing, how beat up would we be physically? How screwed up would we be emotionally?

What does God want? For us to be a voice for oppressed people, widows, foreigners, unprotected people, the handicapped, minorities, poor people, and any and every person who is treated as less than God's child. Micah describes God as characterized by pardoning inequity, overlooking sin, letting go of anger, delighting in loving us faithfully. God has compassion on us, stomping on our messes and throwing our sins out to sink in the ocean. We're expected to act with the same mercy and compassion that we have received from God. That calls for a lot of humility and lots of compassion. Amen.

Sisters and Brothers,  
 God calls governments to lift up those who suffer  
 And to administer justice compassionately and even-handily.  
 These are the things that are important to God  
 And as Christians in a democracy,  
 we bear the responsibility of supporting our elected officials in these efforts.