

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 14, 2020**

**WHAT DOES GOD WANT?
Micah 6:6-8**

Micah 6:8 is one of the most well-known keynote verses of the Old Testament. It expresses what God wants from His people. It tells us how God wants the recipients of His love and grace to live in this world. Today and next Sunday, I want to explore with you what it looks like to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God.

The prophet Micah was from the village of Moresheth about 20 miles or so southwest of Jerusalem. He lived during the same time period as Isaiah and Hosea – the 2nd half of the 8th century (BC) and the early years of the 7th century BC. He carried out his role as a spokesman for God during the reigns of 3 kings of Judah: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. It was an era of material prosperity in Judah, but spiritually the nation was decaying. Unless there was a significant and lasting spiritual revival among the people of Judah, its days as a nation were numbered. In 586 BC, 100 years after the death of Hezekiah (one of the “good” kings who intently desired to follow the Lord), Judah was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and the army of Babylon. Its leaders were taken by force into exile. It was the end of the nation of Judah as we know it.

Through His prophets, God warned His covenant people over and over again of the judgment to come, if they did not turn away from their rebellion and turn back to Him. In Micah 6, God takes His people to court. He files a lawsuit against them. God is both the plaintiff and the judge – the righteous Judge of all the earth, as the Scripture declares in several places (Genesis 18:25; Psalm 9:8; 96:10, 13; 98:9; 2 Timothy 4:1, 8; James 4:12). Micah serves as the prosecuting attorney against the people. He calls the whole creation to hear the Lord’s complaint. Here is what he says in Micah 6:2-5:

Hear, O mountains, the LORD’s accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.
For the LORD has a case against His people;
He is lodging a charge against Israel.

‘My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you?

Answer me.

I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.

My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,

that you may know the righteous (saving, ESV)
acts of the LORD.’

You know about God’s deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt. You know about the plagues and the Passover. You know about the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea on dry ground. You know how God used Moses, Aaron, and Miriam – Joshua and Caleb as well – to lead His people. You know about God’s faithful provision for His people during their years in the wilderness.

The mention of Balak king of Moab and Balaam son of Beor is a reminder from the Book of Numbers (22-24) of God’s desire, intention, and plan to bless His people, and His unwillingness to curse them as Balak wished.

The reference to Shittim and Gilgal is to remind God’s people of the final leg of their journey to the Promised Land, as they set out from the plains of Moab, crossed the Jordan River near Jericho and set up camp at Gilgal, where they renewed the covenant God had made with them at Sinai (see Joshua 2-5).

All of this history was to call to mind God’s constant, covenant love and faithfulness toward His people. Undeniable. Indisputable. And totally undeserved. Acts of mercy and grace from a merciful and gracious God. God never stopped being kind to His forgetful people, but their short memory and lack of thankfulness brought them pain and sorrow.

In verses 6 and 7, Micah echoes the response of the people, who ask God, in essence: “What do you want from us, anyway?” They thought their sacrifices were enough to satisfy God and to guarantee His favor in their lives. Like the Pharisees in Jesus’ day, they thought the rituals of their religion were all that God desired or required. The value of their proposed sacrifices increases to the point of absurdity – from the prescribed burnt offering of a calf to the ostentatious offering of “thousands of rams” and “ten thousand rivers of oil” – as if outward expressions of piety are all that God cares about. Jesus made it clear to the Pharisees that it just isn’t so.

But it doesn’t end there. The people took their “defense” of their “devotion” to the outrageous extreme of asking if God wanted them to sacrifice their own children (as was done in some pagan religions) to secure God’s favor. They said:

“Shall I offer my firstborn (child) for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
(6:7b)

Is *that* what you want, LORD?

No, no, no! That is not what God wants. Never was. Never will be. There is only One who can ever atone for my transgression and yours, only One who can pay the penalty for the sins of our souls. That One, of course, is Jesus, God’s own Son. Only Jesus can do it. No one else.

The beauty of the gospel is that Jesus *has* done it. He *has* taken our sins and transgressions upon Himself in order to satisfy the perfect justice of God, to lavish God's mercy and grace upon us, to restore us to a right relationship with God, and to give us the sure and certain hope of eternal life with Him. Jesus *has* done it all.

Micah approached the question of what God wants from the perspective of salvation history in the Old Testament – before the coming of Christ. We're on the other side of the coming of Jesus. We're on the other side of His saving work on the cross. But the answer Micah gives in verse 8 is as relevant and applicable to us today as it was to the people of Judah 700 years before the first coming of Christ.

What does God want – not as a religious ritual, but as the response of grateful hearts to the grace we have received from Him? Micah 6:8 is not the only answer or the total answer. God's Word contains a rich treasury of answers to this question. Micah's answer is especially needed in light of the particular challenges confronting us in these days. As I suggested last Sunday, there is a sense that what Micah says here is the distilled essence of wisdom. Acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God will never, ever be unwise. These are three essential qualities of a God-pleasing life.

DO JUSTICE

So, what does God want? First, says Micah, God wants us to “act justly.” Literally, it says: “Do justice.” The essence of justice is treating others with equity and fairness, with a special regard for people who are in a weaker position and are more vulnerable to be treated unjustly. In our culture, of course, those most likely to be treated unjustly are the poor, African-Americans, and other minorities. A proper, biblical concern for justice must include justice for those who have been historically victimized by injustice, racial or otherwise. For the United States to be a truly just nation, we must be committed, not only in theory but in actual practice, to “justice for all” – not one system of justice for a certain group of people and a different system that too often violates or denies the rights of others.

Justice is not simply a social or political concern. Racial justice is not simply a social or political issue. I hope you see and understand that it is a biblical concern. It is a biblical issue. Micah is not the only prophet to articulate God's concern for justice. In the very first chapter of the Book of Isaiah, Isaiah says:

Hear the word of the LORD:
 Stop doing wrong,
 Learn to do right!
 Seek justice,
 Stand up for the oppressed.
 Defend the cause of the fatherless,
 Plead the case of the widow.
 (1:16d-17)

The Message puts it like this:

Say no to wrong.
 Learn to do good.
 Work for justice.
 Help the down-and-out.
 Stand up for the homeless.
 Go to bat for the defenseless.

That is Isaiah 1. Fast forward to Isaiah 58, and you'll find that God is interested in far more than days of fasting and religious holy days, as good as they may be. The Lord says:

This is the kind of fast day I'm after:
 To break the chains of injustice,
 Get rid of exploitation in the workplace,
 Free the oppressed,
 Cancel debts.
 What I'm interested in seeing you do is:
 Sharing your food with the hungry,
 Inviting the homeless poor into your homes,
 Putting clothes on the shivering ill-clad,
 Being available to your own families.
 (Isaiah 58:6-7. *MSG*)

What God is interested in is *justice*. With *mercy* and *compassion* added into the mix.

God is a God of justice. True justice is rooted in the character of God. To the extent that they are truly just, the laws of our country, or any country, reflect the character of God. Unjust laws and all practices that subvert justice violate the character of God, who is righteous in all His ways (Psalm 145:17).

Doing justice is our calling as Christians. This does not simply mean treating other people fairly in all our interactions and relationships. It *does* mean this. But it means *more* than this. It means pursuing justice and fairness for others who have been mistreated or subjected to injustice because of the color of their skin or their socio-economic status or where they are from or ... any other descriptor we use to label or divide and demean people.

In his book *Generous Justice*, author and pastor Tim Keller tells of a young man named Mark who told Keller he was planning to move into one of the poorest and most dangerous neighborhoods in Baltimore. When Keller asked him why, he said simply: "To do justice."

It had been decades since any white people had moved into that part of town. For the first couple of years there, it was touch and go for this young man. He said: "The police thought I was a drug dealer, and the drug dealers thought I was a police officer. So, for a while, I didn't know who was going to shoot me first." Can you imagine?

Nevertheless, over the years, with other leaders in the community, this young man on a mission established a church and developed ministries that have slowly brought about change in the neighborhood. Although he had been living a safe, comfortable life, he sensed God's call to care for the most vulnerable, poor, and marginalized members of our society, and made long-term personal sacrifices to service their interests, needs, and cause. As Keller says, this, according to the Bible, is what it means to "do justice" (Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*).

Do you have to move into the poorest, most dangerous neighborhood in the city or the county in order to do justice? No. We can all do justice right where we are. We can all act justly in our relationships and interactions with others. We can all make justice – not just for ourselves, but especially for others – a way of life. We can stand up and speak up for those who are mistreated. We can ask if the way others are treated in our country is just and fair. We can say "Enough!" to the evils of racism, racial bias, racial abuse, and racial injustice that still exist in America, cancers that threaten and harm far too many people and far too many families and far too many communities, not to mention the soul of our nation. We can stand up in the name of Jesus and work against injustice in all its forms. We can stand alongside our African-American sisters and brothers who experience the subtle (sometimes not so subtle) effects of racism. We can befriend our African-American neighbors and value them as equals. We can be intentional about entering into the situations of our brothers and sisters in Christ who experience life in America differently than some of the rest of us do. We can make sure there is no cancer of race in our church.

Slavery was abolished in America more than 150 years ago. Yet its underlying premise is still a cancer among us. Civil rights attorney Bryan Stevenson, author of the book *Just Mercy*, which was the basis for a 2019 film starring Jamie Foxx and Michael B. Jordan, said recently: "The greatest evil of American slavery wasn't the involuntary servitude; it was the fiction that black people aren't as good as white people, and aren't the equals of white people, and are less ... human, less capable, less worthy, less deserving than white people." (Interview with Isaac Chotiner, *The New Yorker*, June 1, 2020.)

It is an abominable heresy for any Christian to believe that any race of people is better than another, or that one group is of less value than another. It denies the biblical doctrine of the creation of all humankind in the *imago dei*. It also refuses to embrace the vision of Revelation 7:9, which tells of an innumerable multitude of believers in Christ "from every nation, tribe, people, and language, standing before the throne (of God) and in front of the Lamb."

You see, don't you, that God's vision for His church includes people from all nations and races, all languages and people groups, all united as one people to worship the God of our salvation? And that God's vision for justice is for all people of all races and backgrounds to be treated with equity and fairness and respect?

Next Sunday, we'll look at what it means to "love mercy and walk humbly with your God." Let me wrap it up today by sharing what one other prophet – Amos – has to say about justice. In Amos 5, he denounces those "who turn justice into bitterness" and "stomp righteousness into the mud (*MSG*)," who hate champions of justice, who "trample on the poor" and exploit them, and who "deprive the poor of justice in the courts" (Amos 5:7, 10, 11, 12).

Then, after castigating the people for the shallowness of their religious rituals and the injustices to which they turn a blind eye, the prophet says: “Let justice roll down like a river and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). In *The Message* the Lord says:

Do you know what I want?
I want justice – oceans of it.
I want fairness – rivers of it.
That’s what I want.

What does God want? What does God want here in America? Justice and fairness for black Americans and white Americans and Hispanic Americans and Asian Americans, for rich Americans and poor Americans, for police officers and the people they are to serve and protect, for business owners, employers and employees, for Christians and non-Christians, for conservatives and liberals and everyone in between. For *all* Americans. *Period.*

This *is* a biblical issue. *Racial justice* is a biblical issue. *Equal justice* under the law is a biblical issue. It is a pressing political and social issue, to be sure. Now is the time for us as followers of Jesus – as His church – to show our sisters and brothers, our neighbors, and the world that we will act justly – we will stand up for justice for all people – in the name of Jesus.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.