

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 21, 2020**

WHAT DOES GOD WANT? (2)

Micah 6:8

What *does* God want? Part of the answer, as we saw last Sunday, is that God wants justice – “oceans of it.” God wants fairness – “rivers of it” (Amos 5:24, *MSG*). He wants us to “do justice” (Micah 6:8), which means not only demanding justice for ourselves when we are treated unjustly, but ensuring that *all people* are treated with equity and fairness, especially those who have historically been disfavored or denied fair treatment under the law.

As I said last week, this is not merely a social issue or a political issue. It does have huge social and political implications. But I’m talking about it because it is a biblical issue. It is an unavoidable issue for anyone who takes the Bible seriously and wants to be a biblically faithful Christian. The biblical call to justice is both urgent and unmistakable.

In addition to Micah, Isaiah, and Amos (whose calls for justice I called to your attention last Sunday), there is also this from Zechariah, another of the Old Testament prophets. In Zechariah 7 we read: “The word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says:

Administer true justice;
show mercy and compassion to one another.
Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless,
the alien or the poor
(all of whom were particularly vulnerable to being mistreated).
In your hearts do not think evil of each other.’
(Zechariah 7:8-10)

Here is how Peterson puts it in *The Message*:

Treat one another justly.
Love your neighbors.
Be compassionate with each other.
Don’t take advantage of widows, orphans,
visitors, and the poor.
Don’t plot and scheme against one another –
that’s evil.

It’s pretty clear, isn’t it? What God wants from His people is to treat one another with justice, compassion, and mercy.

Last Sunday I mentioned Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative and author of the book *Just Mercy*. I read the book a few years ago and am now re-reading it. It is not an easy or pleasant read. But it is an important book. It is eye-opening. As is the movie based on

the book. I usually don't recommend movies, because personal standards about movies are so different. But I will say that some of you should probably see the movie. More of you, though, should read the book.

In the book, Stevenson tells of speaking early on about his work on behalf of death-row inmates at a small African-American church in Alabama. During his talk, Stevenson says, there was an older man in a wheelchair who looked at him intensely throughout his presentation. The man's focused stare, Stevenson says, was unnerving. After the program, people came up to Stevenson and thanked him for his talk and the work he was doing. The man in the wheelchair, still staring at him, waited at the back of the church until everyone else had gone. The young boy who was with him (probably about 12 years old) wheeled the older man up to the front of the church where Stevenson was. When he got to the front, the older man leaned forward and said to Stevenson: "Do you know what you're doing?"

Stevenson didn't know what to say. He couldn't tell if the man was being hostile or what. The man wagged his finger at Stevenson and said, again: "Do you know what you're doing?"

Stevenson says he tried to smile to diffuse the situation, but he was completely baffled. "I think so ..." he said.

The older man cut him off and said loudly: "I'll tell you what you're doing. You're beating the drum for justice!" His passion was written all over his face. He said it again, emphatically: "You've got to beat the drum for justice!"

Then he leaned back in his wheelchair. After a moment, Stevenson answered softly: "Yes, sir."

The man leaned forward again and said hoarsely: "You've got to keep beating the drum for justice." A moment passed, and he said it again: "Beat the drum for justice."

The older man then pulled Bryan Stevenson close and showed him the scars on the top of his head, the side of his head just above his right ear, and a permanent bruise at the base of his skull. He called them his "medals of honor." Each one had been received during the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The Bible calls all of us, and each of us, to beat the drum for justice – wherever justice is denied or delayed, wherever and whenever individuals or groups of people are deprived of justice. It is not merely political or social. It is not optional. It is biblical. The Bible tells us to 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute.' This verse – Proverbs 31:8 – is not just about unborn children, children in the womb, who cannot speak for themselves. It *is* about them. But it is not *only* about them. It is about all who are marginalized, undervalued, considered inferior or expendable by society. It is about the poor. It is about victims of racism.

Christians, of all people, should lead the march to beat the drum of justice for all people, because we know and affirm the value, worth, and dignity of every person created in the

image of God, regardless of the color of a person's skin or where they are from or what language they speak.

What does God want? He wants us to beat the drum for justice.

But justice is not the only thing God cares about. It is not the only thing God wants. The second thing God wants of us, says Micah, is to "love mercy" (6:8). The word translated "mercy" in verse 8 is the Hebrew word *hesed*, which is used something like 250 times in the Old Testament. It is sometimes translated as "steadfast love" or "loyalty" or "covenant faithfulness." No matter how you translate it, it speaks of an essential quality in a God-pleasing life.

To love mercy, simply put, is to make mercy a way of life. That God is merciful to sinners is beyond question. As David says in Psalm 103:

The LORD is compassionate and gracious,
slow to anger, abounding in love.
He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve,
nor pay us back in full for our wrongs.
(Psalm 103:8, 10, *NIV, MSG*)

That is the essence of mercy: God doesn't treat us the way we deserve to be treated because of our sins. If it were not for God's mercy, you and I would have absolutely no hope of salvation. But God. Is. Merciful. God. Is. Gracious. In Christ – through His saving work on our behalf, because Jesus took the punishment we deserve upon Himself – God treats us better than we deserve. In His amazing grace, which comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will (like us), God showers us with mercies, the Bible says, that are new every morning (Lamentations 3:23).

As God is merciful to us, so He calls us to be merciful to others. He wants us to be people who *love* mercy. People who *show* mercy. People who *do* mercy, just as we are called to *do* justice.

The kind of wisdom that is truly wise in God's eyes, as it says in James 3:17, is "full of mercy" and the good deeds that come from mercy.

You know what Jesus says: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Jesus also calls us to "be merciful, just as your Father (in heaven) is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Mercy involves both our attitudes and our actions. As people who need mercy from God and often from others, as people who have received mercy from God and (I trust) from one another, we've got to show mercy, both in how we treat others and in how we think about one another.

Doing acts of mercy is not always convenient, is it? But showing kindness to someone in need is not optional for us as followers of Jesus. It is how we're supposed to roll as we represent Jesus in our families, in the church and the world.

The poster child for showing mercy in the New Testament is the "good Samaritan" in Jesus' parable in Luke 10. To the devout Jews of Jesus' day, the whole idea of a "good Samaritan" was an oxymoron. The words *Samaritan* and *good* didn't belong together. Why? Because Jews were racially prejudiced against Samaritans. And vice versa. Samaritans were part-Jewish and part-Gentile, going back to the time of the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and the subsequent intermarriage of Israelites and Assyrians. The racial divide had gone on for more than 700 years before the time of Jesus. To make a Samaritan the hero of a story, as Jesus did, was an outrage to the devout Jews of Jesus' day. But it didn't stop Jesus.

You probably know the story. A man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho was mugged, beaten, robbed by a gang of robbers, and left in a ditch, half-dead. A Jewish priest came along and saw the injured man, but didn't stop to help. He kept going. So did a Levite, a Temple assistant. Both of them passed by on the other side of the road. Then, says Jesus, a Samaritan traveling the road came along. When he saw the man's condition, his heart went out to him. He gave him first aid. He disinfected and bandaged his wounds. Then he put him on his donkey, led him to an inn, and made him comfortable. In the morning he took out 2 silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper (if it were today, it would be a wad of cash or, more likely, a credit card), and said: "Take good care of him. If it costs any more, put it on my bill – I'll pay you when I come back."

"What do you think?" Jesus asked. "Which of these three was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by robbers?"

The expert in the Jewish law who had been listening to Jesus said: "The one who had mercy on him."

To which Jesus said: "Go and do likewise." (Luke 10:30-37, *NIV, MSG*)

The essence of mercy is showing kindness and compassion to someone who needs it, regardless of whether they deserve it or not. *How* we show mercy requires wisdom and discernment. Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert's book, *When Helping Hurts*, demonstrates that in our desire to help people in need, especially the poor, sometimes our efforts may actually hurt them in the long run. This does not mean we should not love mercy or show mercy. It does mean that we need to show kindness and compassion to others in ways that do not undermine their well-being and dignity.

In the case of the good Samaritan, the needs of the man who had been mugged were obvious and urgent. There was no question about whether or how to show mercy. This good Samaritan, filled with compassion, did what he could to care for his neighbor in need, modeling what it means to be a good neighbor.

This is the essence of mercy. It is compassion in action that comes from a heart of love.

I was touched by this story that shows the spirit of mercy. One night, an NYPD officer named Lawrence DePrimo encountered a homeless man in Times Square. It was November and it was cold. The homeless man was an older guy. And he was barefoot. The officer, who normally worked in a different part of the city, heard someone laughing at this elderly gentleman who had no shoes or socks. “You could see the blisters from a distance,” he said. “I had two pair of socks and was still cold.”

So the officer asked the man if he had anything to cover his feet. The homeless man replied: “It’s okay, sir. I’ve never had a pair of shoes. But God bless you (for asking).” As the homeless man walked away, the police officer caught up to him and asked him his shoe size before walking into a Skechers store on West 42nd Street. The officer told a store employee: “I’d like to buy a pair of boots, something that will last a while. I don’t care what the price is.” The officer proceeded to buy a \$100 pair of all-weather boots, size 12. The store manager said later: “We were just kind of shocked. Most of us are New Yorkers and we just kind of pass by that kind of thing. Especially in this neighborhood.”

What the officer didn’t know was that a tourist from Arizona was watching as all of this took place. She posted a picture to the NYPD’s official Facebook page, which went viral and got hundreds of thousands of “likes.”

In times like these, with the police under tremendous attack – justly deserved in some cases – it is good to highlight an act of mercy perpetrated by a police officer.

If Jesus were to tell us the story of this officer and the homeless, shoeless man, I think He would probably say to us: “Go and do likewise.” Meet the needs of others with deeds of mercy.

What does God want? It is no secret. He wants us to beat the drum for justice. He wants us to love mercy. He wants us to *be* merciful to others. He wants us to meet needs with deeds of mercy.

Micah says there is one more thing: God wants us to walk humbly with Him. We’ll have to come back to this. Not next Sunday but two weeks from today. Mike is going to preach next Sunday, which is his last official Sunday before he steps down as our Youth Director. I hope you will join us for Worship next Sunday.

Justice. Mercy. Humility before God. These are three essential qualities of a God-pleasing life. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.