

THE MICAH PLAN

What Does the Lord Ask of Us? The J-Word (Part 3) | Micah 6:6-8

Have you ever been in a conversation with a family member or a friend or maybe even a co-worker and the discussion gets intense? Assertions are being made and emotions are getting high. There's this swirl of words and feelings that almost feels like a tornado sweeping you up, till you or the other person finally blurts out: **"What do you want of me?! What do you expect me to do?! Just make it clear and concrete and maybe I can do it!!!"** Ever had a moment like that?

Long ago, at a moment like that, the prophet Micah spoke some helpful words to the Jewish people. It was a time of national distress -- you might even say disease. The southern kingdom of Judah had been ruled by an alternating succession of bad and good kings while the northern kingdom of Israel had endured mostly corrupt leaders. Religion had become superficial and selfish. Many of the ethics and social practices commended by God "so that it might go well in the land" for all the children of Israel had been forgotten or abandoned. As the beloved Bible teacher, Chuck Swindoll, it was an era of *"unjust business dealings, robbery, mistreatment of women and children, and a government that lived in luxury off the hard work of its nation's people."*¹

So God sends the prophet Micah and his contemporaries, Isaiah and Hosea, to speak to his people. They challenge the individual and institutional behaviors that are breaking the heart of God and leading to the breakdown of health and hope in this his Promised Land. Repentance and renewal are desperately needed at every level of Jewish society. But most people reject the voice of the prophets, until God lets his judgment fall upon them. Soon, the northern Kingdom of Israel is conquered by Assyria and, eventually, the southern Kingdom of Judah is obliterated by Babylon.

But before it all happens, the prophet Micah makes one last ditch effort to describe how hope can be restored. He speaks of a coming day when there will be a new kind of King and kingdom governing the people: **But you, Bethlehem... though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord... And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. (Micah 5:2-4)**

In other words, the ultimate restoration of the nations awaits the coming of the One we now know as Jesus and the final Kingdom he establishes. But so that his listeners won't just sit idle, leaving things as they are until that ultimate redemption comes, in the very next chapter, Micah transports his audience to a heavenly court room. In chapter six, verses 1 and 2, Micah pictures them standing before the Supreme Judge. In verses 3 through 5, he rehearses the ways that God has blessed and rescued and provided for his people time and again. And in the context of this overwhelming goodness God has

shown to his people, Micah advises them to think carefully about what the One who sits on the Supreme Bench might reasonably expect from them NOW as they live toward the day when the Lord's kingdom reaches to the ends of the earth.

So, Micah calls his listeners – and by extension us – to ask this question: **With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?** In other words, ***"What do you want from me? It's kind of confusing these days to know what you expect me to do!"*** So in verses 6 and 7, Micah offers some options: **Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?** In other words, are you looking for more religious rituals, God? Do you want more sacrifice in the offering plate or more prayers of lament over how troubled my soul and our society is? How much saying sorry for our history is enough? Or is it my actual blood you require? **Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?** Are you asking me to give up my precious child for the sins of this world? No, God himself will actually do that on behalf of human beings on a hill outside Jerusalem many years ahead.

"So what does God want from our broken nation, the people may have asked Micah. ***Please, make it clear and concrete and maybe I can do it!!!***" So Micah obliges in verse 8: **He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To ACT JUSTLY and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.** I'm guessing most all of us get the idea that God wants his people **"to act justly."** I'm praying that after the first two installments in this series or, more importantly, your own reading of the Bible, none of us are thinking, *Gosh, I'm not sure God or Jesus cares much about justice. I think that's just a BLM or CRT category or a distortion of Christianity by those 'social gospel' people."*

Let me be emphatically clear that the Bible teaches that God cares preeminently about the health of human souls. The word the Bible uses for that pursuit is "righteousness" – as in "being rightly aligned" with God and his character. Until we come into right relationship with God through Jesus Christ, our sin continually blocks us from a truly abundant life here on earth or an eternal life with God beyond this present earth. Until the Holy Spirit floods our life with God's power, it becomes harder to repair other dimensions of human life. In that sense, a Gospel that is only social isn't really good news in the full sense God means and our world needs.

At the same time -- if you've studied the Old Testament Law, the words of the Hebrew Prophets, and the life and teaching of Jesus himself – then you are also clear, that God cares passionately about the health of human societies and the various systems and structures that make them up. As the Dutch statesman, Abraham Kuyper, once said: *"There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!"*

This is likely why the Old Testament in particular is full of teaching about what God considers just practices when it comes to systems like banking, harvesting, land

conservation, jurisprudence, refugee management, care for widows and orphans and more. Scripture doesn't give us specific policy papers for all these dimensions of societal life. If we look, we'll find some transferable principles and practices there. But the term the Bible uses for trying to improve the systems of a society so that more of God's children truly flourish is the pursuit of "justice."

I think we sometimes slip into thinking that God is planning to leave saved souls in some disembodied heaven forevermore. But the last two chapters of the Book of Revelation make clear that God's plan is to marry heaven with earth. That ultimate destination gets described as a glorious New City. But in the meantime, while we live here, God says to his people: **Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jeremiah 29:7)**. Do you suppose that if Christians living in or around every city in America were widely experienced as the people most engaged in working for the social well-being of all the people of that city, it would make it any easier for us to gain a hearing on matters of the soul? Would it increase the number of people who become open to having Jesus as their Lord? I think the early church had that kind of influence and we could again. As Dr. Pearce reminded us: **Righteousness AND justice are the foundation of [God's] throne (Psalm 89:14)**.

One of the challenges I personally face when I think about working harder for justice is the view I sometimes have of those people who need greater justice – who need the legal, educational or employment systems of society working better for them or greater help with resourcing and repair. When I am ruthlessly honest with myself, I think: *"Some of these people deserve the life they have."* The man in prison. The unwed mother. The gang banger. The homeless person. The drug pusher or prostitute. The family living in the tenement. The kid that drops out of school. The cop that made a terrible mistake. The addict or alcoholic. To a greater or lesser extent, I think, these people put themselves there. They deserve this.

And then I think of the Cross of Christ and the storyline of my life. Everything in my theology tells me that but for the MERCY of Jesus Christ, I would be dead forever in my sins. The list of ways that I have fallen short or overstepped some godly boundary is too long for me to begin to contemplate. But for the MERCY of the parents who kept loving and nurturing me and offering me another chance when I lied or stole or failed, I would be a very different person. But for the MERCY of so many mentors and colleagues and co-workers who came alongside me in hours when I didn't know what to do or how to get out of the mess I'd made, I shudder to imagine my life. But for the MERCY of this congregation who endured my immaturity and bonehead moves in the early days of my time here, I'd be pastoring a small rural church in Canada!

God says that he wants us to act justly and **LOVE MERCY** – perhaps because so many of us have received so much of it and because HE is the ultimate Source of it. **For the Lord your God is a merciful God He will not leave you or destroy you (Deuteronomy 4:31)**. It's striking to me that Jesus spent so much of his time while he was walking this earth with people who were broken, downtrodden, sick, outcast,

poor or failures. Jesus not only saw and sought out and stayed with such people. He built his church with such people. Not only those people, of course. He also built his church on the likes of Zaccheus and Joseph of Arimathea and the prosperous businesswoman Lydia. But in one way or another, almost everyone who joined the cause of Christ came because they knew they needed mercy. The Apostle Peter said of the early church: **Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:10)**. And these people became mercy-givers in a Roman world that barely understood the concept, that thought people should only get what they deserve.

What does God require of us, his people, today? On the basis of the life and teaching of Jesus, it seems like the prescription of the MICAH PLAN still works. God wants us to act justly, love mercy, and **WALK HUMBLY** with him and one another. Humility is really needed in our time. For all the reasons that I described in week one of our series, the topic of justice can trigger us and bring out a level of pride, certainty, or anger that are not particularly Jesus-like or helpful to the advance of his kingdom.

After my first sermon in this series, I got a letter from someone in this church that struck me as a great example of what it looks like to **"walk humbly"** in a conversation about justice. The writer started out with some encouraging remarks and then patiently explained how he felt I'd given the impression that in describing justice as embracing the continuum of concern for "Law & Order" on the one side and "Resourcing & Repair" on the other side, I'd left people with the impression that conservatives are mainly interested in Law & Order and progressives in Resourcing & Repair when the reality is much more nuanced. I thought about and realized: "He's correct. I'm sure that I gave that impression. I apologize for that."

As the writer pointed out, some of the people who most care about Law and Order think of themselves as progressives. I talk with progressive friends in Chicago who are outraged by looting and violence. It's their neighborhoods and stores that are being wrecked. They naturally want the police to act justly. They want our criminal justice system to treat them and their families as fairly as our family might get treated. But they are not sympathetic with those who want to defund the police or sanction lawlessness. Similarly, there are many conservatives who care deeply about Resourcing & Repair. Some of them struggle with how that's done and with finding what actually works to lift people up versus make them perpetually dependent. Help them see that a program can truly help people rise and many of them will likely get behind it.

So, here's my question: Could you and I walk more humbly in our conversations about justice? If I'm honest before God, I know I sometimes overstate, oversimplify, or over-box people when I get into thinking or talking about this subject or a lot of the other hot topics of our day. I would benefit from raising questions or objections in a more thoughtful, gracious way and trying to understand the life experience behind others' point of view. How many times a day do you suppose Jesus heard somebody say something which, from his divine point of view, must have seemed thoroughly ignorant, distorted or abhorrent? I wonder if, when the Apostle James wrote: **My dear brothers**

and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry (James 1:19), he might have been showing us three of the steps required in **“walking humbly”** with God and others.

I want to leave you today with some great encouragement and hope. It’s not like “justice” is some new subject at Christ Church. For our entire history as a congregation, we have been working to see souls brought into communion with Jesus Christ AND to shape structures and systems that can LIFT more people toward their God-given potential. Christ Church founded the LOVE Christian Clearinghouse ministry that has helped thousands of people find practical hope and help in times of crisis. We’ve funded programs that support women in having children that might otherwise have been aborted. This congregation has poured millions of dollars and thousands of hours into tutoring and mentoring programs for underresourced kids in our area and around the world. We are a long term investor in the work of Prison Fellowship that is changing the lives of inmates and their families and working for criminal justice reform.

We were one of the first and still are a continuing supporter of the Lawndale Community Church which has not only made thousands of disciples but provided healthcare to hundreds of thousands of people, and a support network for ex-offenders and recovering addicts, and enabled hundreds of people to buy their first home. A few years ago, we founded a local Christian Community Development Corporation called Resilient that is now partnering with businesspeople in our congregation to operate a building trades apprenticeship program that trains at-risk young people with the life-skills they need to get placed in well-paying jobs. Together each year, we provide funding and volunteers to Reclaim13, a local ministry that helps young girls escape the clutches of sex traffickers. Our people are serving with Breakthrough Urban Ministry and Inner City Impact and By The Hand Kids Club. At our Butterfield Campus we’re exploring opening a branch of Administer Justice – a Christian legal aid service. We’re beginning to think together about what it might look like to sponsor a comprehensive Care Center that advanced the cause of righteousness and justice together.

If you want to know more about any of this or find out how to be part of this work, just write to us at serve@christchurch.us. Because when we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, it helps fulfill his plan to manifest more of the kingdom of heaven here on earth, until that time when he makes all things NEW (Revelation 21:5).

¹ <https://insight.org/resources/bible/the-minor-prophets/micah>