

January 22 Series on Micah

To Do Justice

Micah 6:6-8

Background

Micah lived in the eighth century BCE. His name means: “Who is like God?” so it might be more of a title than his real name. Micah comes from a small village southwest of Jerusalem called Moresheth. He identifies with the poor and the oppressed and they are really struggling at this moment. Micah lived in a time of great transition. In the first half of that century, both Judah and Israel prospered because the great powers of the ancient Near East, preoccupied with other matters, did not torment them. That situation changed very rapidly after 746 BCE when Tiglath-Pileser III came to power in Assyria. A resurgence of Assyrian power led to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel and its capital city, Samaria, in 722 BCE. Judah avoided a similar fate but paid a high price for its subservience to Assyria—huge tributes, loss of complete independence, and corruption of its traditions by the incorporation of religious practices of the dominant foreign power into their worship. And then, as now, to pay the tribute the poor’s taxes were a greater percentage of their income than it was for the wealthy.

Into this time of great change, when the fortunes of God’s people had already declined and promised to get even worse, Micah stepped forward to provide a theological interpretation of crucial events facing the nation and its people. He was one of several prophets living at this time. Isaiah and Hosea might have been his contemporaries. He believed at least some of the problems the people were facing were due to the fact that they were not following God’s word. He also believed that God was upset with how they were oppressing the poor at such a time. His words were a challenge to those in power and most of all a challenge to all, rich and poor, as to how to live. But Micah was not a doom and gloom prophet. He also wanted them to have hope, believing God was with them in this dark time.

Message

In their time the pervading logic or theology was that they could not be going through all this turmoil unless God was angry with them. Since God is upset with them they want to know what to do. The people thought that they could please God through religious ritual and ceremony. They wanted God and others to know that they hadn't shirked their responsibility. You can sense the hyperbole here when Micah talks about the sacrifices given to God. He mentions 10,000 rivers of oil, thousands of rams, even my first born. All of this is offered to God and yet they are in trouble. What more could God want?

We have been there, haven't we? We or a family member is struggling. We think about all the prayers that we and others have offered, all the promises we have made to God and yet things get worse instead of better. We, like the people in Micah's day, get angry with God. We feel we have done our part so that God should now help us more than God has been doing. We end up demanding, just like them, "What more do you want?"

Instead of focusing on why bad things are happening to them Micah explores our relationship with God. Ultimately, it comes down to this: "How can persons know that they are right with God?" When things are going well we assume we are being blessed by God. This might not be the case but we don't really question our relationship. When things are difficult we ultimately want to know that God cares and that God is with us. Micah gives us some ways to think about this perennial faith question. Clearly God makes demands on those whom God calls into community. But which comes first: God's actions to form the community or meritorious behavior that earns acceptance from God? Micah places the initiative with God, the God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt and made of them a nation. But now that they are God's people they are expected to live accordingly. If they are unable or unwilling there will be unpleasant consequences. We might want to argue that life is much messier than this simple cause and effect picture that Micah portrays but it is helpful for us to see it as a point for beginning our discussion.

When things are tough we sometimes wonder if we are right with God. We wonder if this is happening because God is mad at us. Micah doesn't promise that God will come in and fix the problems. But Micah shares what it means to be right with God and from that we gain the strength to handle the challenges of life. So, what does God want from us? God is asking for us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. Doing what Micah asks will help put all of life into balance. It will help us know we are right with God and then, if there are problems, we at least know it is not God's way of punishing us.

What God requires is both easier and harder than we think. It is easier because there is nothing that we need to do to make ourselves sufficiently worthy to approach God. For Micah, no matter how big the sacrificial offering it isn't enough. For us, no matter how often we go to church or pray it isn't enough to earn God's love. We are loved just because of who we are. So we find it easier than we sometimes make it out to be to approach God.

It is also harder than we sometimes want it to be because what God expects of us is a dedication of our whole lives, not just outward and occasional acts of piety. Jesus would often condemn the outward signs of religiosity because they were not backed up with real commitment to justice and faith.

One of my favorite Old Testament verses is this one from Micah. It is, for me, a precursor to the message of Jesus reminding us of what is important in life. Micah begins by asking, "What does the Lord require of you?" He then answers by saying first off, to do justice. It is not enough to wish for justice or to complain because it is lacking. Doing justice is a dynamic concept that calls on God's people to work for fairness and equality for all, particularly the weak and the powerless who are exploited by others.

I like that idea of doing justice. It makes justice into a verb. It becomes not only a way we behave but a focus for living. We are reminded continually that we are God's people. It is a gift and yet we are to respond to that invitation. Our response is to act justly and work for justice.

The word we translate justly or justice is the Hebrew word *mishpat*. It is a legal term. It means the verdict or decree given when a case is decided and also the required

actions of the individual to follow the decree. It is a concept where a person is found guilty of an offense and then required to do some action to make it better, such as restitution or community service. All of that, the judgment and the actions is part of the word *mishpat*.

Now let's think about this for a moment. Why would Micah use a term from the courts? He was talking about what God wants from us. Could it be that he was trying to get across an idea that these commands or demands of God are more than a gentle suggestion? After all, a judge doesn't issue a decree and then let the person convicted decide whether or not it is convenient for them to follow it. The judge expects compliance.

In the unsettling times of Micah, in the unsettling times of today, it is perhaps good for us to hear the urgency in this word. What does God require? God expects us to do justice, which calls on us to work for fairness and equality for all.

So what does it mean to act justly or to do justice? What I am not going to do is give you my list of things that I feel need to be done if we are to live in a just society. All of us have our passionate concerns and are aware of ways our system is oppressive to others, particularly the weak and the poor. Instead, I am going to talk more generally about what a just world would look like, using the life of Jesus as an example.

It would be a world where everyone is valued. Jesus reached out to the outcasts of his day. He talked and ate with tax collectors and others that proper society called sinners. He touched lepers and took time to listen to the needs of the sick and disabled. He made sure that women and their contributions were valued. To do justice is for us to work to see that all are valued and not ignored.

We have just come through the holiday season. One of the things that I find most uplifting is that all of the news organizations spend more time sharing the positive things of life. We see the news organizations leading programs to raise large sums for food banks. We celebrate resources going to children in foster care. In our own community we heard about toys given away and people supported when life is challenging. I actually enjoyed listening to the news during December because I heard over and over about how kind and generous a people we can be. I recall one story. They have a little girl about age 4. She loves Wednesday mornings because that was when garbage is

collected. She waits at the window to wave at the men and they wave back. She had not been feeling well and tests showed she had cancer. Her chemo therapy treatments were going to have to be on Wednesday mornings. She was so upset because she thought her friends would think she didn't like them anymore. So mom helped her to write them a note telling them the reason she would not be at the window. The next Wednesday when the family came home from the hospital they saw a letter taped to their garbage can. It was from the two men. They had donated their free garbage pick-up to the family. Two weeks later they arrived with presents. That is doing justice. The little girl convinced the doctors to change her chemo day so she could see her friends.

We need to ask ourselves, "What one thing can I do to reach out to any of today's marginalized people?" If we all work at reaching out and demand that we live in a society where all our valued, then God's justice will be occurring.

It would also be a world where elitism is challenged. Jesus' biggest struggles were with the religious leaders of his day who were more concerned about status and place than with true faithfulness. We all carry around our bits of pomposity. Think about how you would be offended if your contributions were not recognized. Let go of the need for a pat on the back. Instead, be willing to serve with no thought of recognition and in ways where others' contributions are praised because they relied on your work. This is a part of our work for justice.

I want us to be thinking about justice as we think about our response to God. The church is an imperfect institution. We are so full of injustice that at times it just makes me want to cry. Yet, we, for the most part, at least realize the injustice among us and name it, and for that reason do better than most institutions at trying to combat it. We see the beam in our eyes, or at least enough of us do to challenge the rest. We strive to make a difference. In supporting the church we are making a statement about our working at dealing with injustice here and around the world.

To do justice is to want a world where people are willing to risk for others. It is risky to demand justice and to work at making it happen. People are rarely appreciative of you telling them where they are acting unjustly or being oppressive. Yet, without the reminders nothing will happen. So this day think about how you can offer to God your

own places where you are the oppressor and ask for forgiveness and think about ways you can do justice while demanding it of our society.

What does the Lord require? As nice as it is to think that going to church is enough, Micah was clear. God wants more, justice and mercy and kindness and humility. We have been challenged by what justice looks like as far as Micah is concerned. We will talk about the other two in the weeks to come.