"What About Biblical Justice?"
Micah 6:1-8
January 24, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

One area of controversy in defining the mission of the church concerns the place of efforts to promote justice. Some within the church want to make such justice issues as poverty alleviation, education, and economic development the primary focus of the church. Others react to that effort by considering these social initiatives to be distractions from the real work of the church, which is gospel proclamation and disciple-making. For the next two weeks, we are going to look at two of the classic justice texts in the Bible, one from the Old Testament and the other from the New Testament. Micah 6:8 is a well-known and well-loved justice passage. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Three duties are required of us in this verse. Let's look at them now.

I. Justice

As is always the case, it is important for us to understand the context of this significant verse, including its historical background. The southern kingdom of Judah was facing the threat of attack by the powerful nation of Assyria. The Assyrians were the superpower of this day, and they had already conquered Judah's relatives in the northern kingdom of Israel. Though God ended up sparing Judah from the Assyrians, things were ripe for judgment in the days of Micah. There was social injustice that took the form of the rich seizing the land belonging to the poor, something forbidden in the Law of Moses. Micah says this about these rich oppressors: **"They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance"** (2:2). In the agrarian economy of Israel, land was the way people provided for themselves. So God declared that land could never be permanently sold from a family. If a Jewish family got into financial trouble, they could rent their land for a time to those with greater resources. But every fiftieth year, in what is known as the Year of Jubilee, all land had to be returned to the original family. Apparently, that law was not being kept, with the result that there arose in Judah a growing and permanent class of the poor. This kind of unjust land grab would require the cooperation of Israel's religious leaders, and they were only too glad to cooperate in it, as long as they received a monetary kickback in the process. **"Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money"** (3:11).

In addition to this injustice, Judah was also guilty of a religious smugness by which they had a false confidence that since they observed the right external

religious practices, God was obligated to rescue them from the Assyrians and all other enemies. They said, **"Is not the Lord in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us"** (3:11). But God had a different perspective. **"Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins"** (3:12). We see this emphasis on external religious practices in verses 6-7 of our chapter, in which they ask God about the offerings they should bring. They start with the proposal that they bring burnt offerings of calves, but they begin to increase the offers, as if God could be bought off with a high enough price. After all, Israel's religious leaders could be bought in that way, so God must be the same. They increase the bid to "thousands of rams" and then "ten thousands of rivers of oil." Then the ultimate and most costly offer of all. **"Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"**

God rejects these bribes and reminds them of what they should have already known. What he requires of them is justice, kindness and humility. Let's start with justice. This receives strong emphasis all the way through the Bible. The Hebrew word, *mishpat*, occurs over two hundred times in the Hebrew Old Testament. What does it mean? Its basic meaning is to give to someone what is due them. So if a person is accused of a crime, they are to be given what is due them. If they are innocent, they are due acquittal, and if guilty, punishment. And these judgments are to be rendered regardless of the person's race or social status. It means what our statue of Lady Justice at the Supreme Court teaches, as she holds the balance scale while being blindfolded. This is very similar to our notion of justice.

There is a second nuance of justice in the Bible. You can see it in Deuteronomy 18:3, a verse that is speaking of the way Israel was to provide for their priests. It directs Israel to give their tithes for this purpose, and says that **"this shall be the priests' due** (*mishpat*) **from the people."** So the meaning of justice here is a gift that God says someone is due. So the basic meaning of justice is to give someone what is due them, whether acquittal or punishment in the case of an alleged crime, or a gift for their care and provision. God extends the list of those who are due such care and provision to categories of people who are on the margins of life, who lack resources and connections. Repeatedly throughout the Old Testament, justice is the word used to describe taking care of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor. These four groups have been referred to as "the quartet of the vulnerable." According to the Bible, provision for them is primarily a matter of justice, not optional charity. Zechariah 7:9-10 is typical. **"Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments** (*mishpat*), **show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor."**

The book *Unbroken* is a riveting story about Louis Zamperini, an American Olympian who competed in the 1936 Olympics and later enlisted to fight in World War II. His plane went down in the Pacific, and he and two others on board

managed to get into the life-raft carried by their plane. It had only limited supplies of food and water. After floating on the ocean for a few days, Louis and another man in the raft awakened to discover that their third companion had eaten all the remaining food and drunk all the remaining water while they were sleeping. We easily see the injustice of such an action, realizing that they should have all shared what provisions they had. The Bible teaches that our situation is not unlike that one.

The Bible's teaching from beginning to end is quite clear. Justice is of major concern to God. We are going to look next week at the parable of the sheep and goats, which teaches that the great separation on Judgment Day will be based on the presence or absence in a person's life of acting justly. So where does justice fit in the mission of the Church? Let's divide our answer to this question into the two categories of justice within the Church and justice outside the Church.

It is clear in the Bible that priority is to be given to establishing justice within the Church. In Galatians 6:10, Paul says that we are to **"do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."** The description of the early church in Acts emphasizes this. Though Jesus had taught that the poor will always be with us (Matt. 26:11), it would seem that we are to labor to eliminate poverty within the church. As the Holy Spirit filled the early church, one of the results was such generosity that **"there was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need"** (4:34-35). Justice within the church was never intended to eliminate inequality, but it is intended to eliminate extreme poverty. As our church's vision statement declares, the Church is intended by God to be a community of the coming kingdom. We are an outpost of God's kingdom, and God's kingdom is a place of perfect justice.

What is the place of justice efforts outside the church? Let me make just two brief comments about that. First, justice efforts will often need to exist in support of our fulfillment of the Great Commission, but should never replace the Great Commission. Pioneering mission works throughout the world have often paired traditional church planting with such things as medical ministry and educational initiatives. Mission work in blighted urban areas in our own nation have often followed a similar blend of typical evangelism and discipleship together with community development. It would be hypocritical for us to speak to people of the love of God through Jesus while failing to show that same love through the pursuit of justice. Second, as we go about whatever daily labors God has called us into, we are to pursue justice in society as a whole. But in doing so, we need to accept the fact that it will never be fully achieved until King Jesus returns.

Before moving to our next point, let me give one example of the way justice should fit with the Great Commission. The example I want to give is in the work being done in Fairfield. For quite some time, this work was limited to various

justice efforts funded and executed by various devoted Christians. Those works included Restoration Academy, Grace House and Hope Health Center. As valuable and necessary as these efforts are, I would say that they were incomplete until joined with the church planting work of Urban Hope, led by Alton Hardy.

II. Kindness

Micah tells us next to love kindness. It is obvious that while justice is focused on action, this is focused on an attitude. The outward performance of duty described as doing justice must be accompanied by an attitude of love. The words of the gospel will often bring anger to people, for the simple reason that it insults human pride. But it is hard to be angry at someone who is just showing you unmerited kindness. It also will often open a door for gospel proclamation.

An illustration from Jack Miller's biography will be helpful. In 1980, Jack led a group from his church in Philadelphia on a short-term mission trip to Uganda. His biographer, Michael Graham, describes the trip as follows:

> A group of New Lifers [Jack's Philadelphia church] and Ugandan Christians preached in Nakasero Market [in Kampala]. But they found that no one was listening to them—the market was too full of stinking, rat-infested garbage for anyone to pay attention or stick around. The debris had piled up so high that dead bodies were found underneath it.
>
> Phil Gross managed to commandeer the only two garbage trucks in the city, and he invited local Anglican bishops to join the NLC team as they cleared away the trash, which they did—still in their white collars. The team stuck a sign that read "Jesus is the answer" on one of the garbage trucks and took turns climbing atop it to share testimonies and preach while other team members shoveled garbage in order to clean up the market. "When Jack came back, he stunk to high heaven," Rose Marie remembered.
>
> Ugandans watched in amazement as these white men shoveled garbage all day long. They had seen only a few white men in their country at all throughout the previous decade of Amin's dictatorial and anti-American rule—and they had never seen a white man shoveling garbage…
>
> As members of the team shoveled garbage in the Nakasero Market and the nearby Owino Market, Jack and some other members climbed onto the garbage truck. Together these Ugandan and American team leaders, covered in dung like Joshua in Zechariah 3, preached the gospel of God's omnipotent grace to the people of Kampala. (pp. 140-142).

III. Humility

To do justice and to love kindness are beyond our natural ability. How are we ever going to meet these requirements? The third element in what God requires answers that question and is the foundation of the others. The Lord requires of us

that we walk humbly with him. This kind of humility is contrasted with the worshiper of verses 6-7, who is filled with pride. Human pride seeks to manipulate and control others to do what we want them to do. This worshiper thinks he can do that with God. If he raises the bid high enough, he can persuade God to do what he wants of God. This is not the path of humility.

Humility by itself is not enough. Note that the text says to walk humbly *with your God.* What does it mean to walk with God in humility? This points up the important difference between just giving up in despair and true humility. The kind of humility this text is talking about is the kind that is full of hope and confidence. When I get on an airplane, I do so as someone who has no ability to fly an airplane. You could say that I am humble about that. But I have no hesitation about boarding the airplane because I also have confidence that there are people in the cockpit who have been trained extensively in how to fly this plane, as well as having a great deal of experience in doing so. So I have both humility and confidence at the same time. That is what it means to walk humbly with my God. I have no pretensions to being able to save myself. I could offer everything laid out in verses 6-7 and it would be just as ineffective as me trying to fly an airplane. But I can still walk with God because I have all I need through his provision for me. My offering of a firstborn son may do nothing, but God's offering of his only-begotten Son does everything. It provides me with forgiveness, with a new status and identity and with a bright hope for the future. To say this differently, the Christian life is all about receiving, not achieving.

The application of this is to invite God to show you your sin, and then to take that sin to Jesus. This is the path the Bible gives for walking in humility with God. It is simply remembering and believing the gospel. The mission of the church is to go forth with the gospel. But before we can do that, we must receive and remember that gospel ourselves. Perhaps you've forgotten it in your own life. If so, your heart for doing justice and loving kindness will suffer. But when we remember the gospel, we experience God's love for us and that creates a fresh love in our hearts for others.

CONCLUSION:

It's news to no one to say that there is a great deal of division in our nation now. On the far left of the political spectrum, some are convinced that what we need is a socialist approach with the government in charge of almost everything. On the far right of the political divide are anarchists who think that we need almost no government at all. The vast majority are somewhere between those two extremes. I'm not here to offer my political opinions. But I am here to say that the greatest need our nation has is for the gospel of Jesus to transform lives, with the result that our citizens will learn to do justice and to love kindness.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Micah 6:1-8

1. Micah 6:8 says that we are to do justice. Review the meaning of justice. Its basic meaning is to give people what they are due. The innocent are due acquittal and the guilty punishment. Also, according to the Bible the poor and marginalized are due help from the rest of us. The common four categories of the poor and marginalized that appear over and over in the Bible are widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor. With this definition in mind, what is the difference between charity and justice?

2. Does this difference between charity and justice have any practical effect upon you?

3. What are some Christian justice ministries you have come to admire? Describe them.

4. How would you describe the relationship that should exist between justice ministry and the Great Commission?

5. The second requirement Micah mentions is to love kindness. Where the first requirement is something we do ("do justice"), this one describes more of an attitude. Can you think of an example of someone, or some act, that embodies this love of kindness? Describe it.

6. How are you doing in the area of loving kindness? Is there some area where you could show more kindness?

7. Verses 6-7 are an illustration of not walking humbly with God. Do you see any of this attitude in your heart? Describe.

8. Spend some time praying for our nation, particularly that God would strengthen the churches of our nation to embody this verse and to be faithful to the mission God has given to us.