

What does the Lord require?

“He has showed you, O man, 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.” Micah 6:8

Micah completes the quartet of eighth century B.C. prophets who ministered during a period of unprecedented prosperity, ostentatious spirituality, and political vulnerability. Amos and Hosea ministered to Samaria and the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah and Micah focused on Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem. Micah’s ministry occurred during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, between 742 and 686. He came from Moresheth an agricultural town, located twenty-one miles southwest of Jerusalem. Like Amos, his agrarian roots appear evident in his choice of metaphors. He prophesied that in the future the remnant of Israel would be gathered together and protected by the Shepherd King, who would come out of Bethlehem (5:2) and rule from Zion (4:1-8). He would cause the nations to submit to his rule and they would beat their swords into plowshares (4:3).

In the midst of all that Micah had to say about corruption, apostasy, greed, and injustice, he was confident that Israel’s future was hopeful. His prophecy was punctuated with the promise of Israel’s Shepherd King (2:12-13; 5:15; 7:14). In spite of a timely message of judgment, Micah delivered a powerful message of hope:

“Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of the brothers return to join the Israelites. He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. And he will be their peace” (5:3-5).

God’s Verdict

The book of Micah consists of three cycles (1:2-2:13; 3:1-5:15; 6:1-7:20). Each

begins with a courtroom summons to listen:

Hear, O peoples, all of you,
listen, O earth and all who are
in it, that the Sovereign Lord
may witness against you, the
Lord from his holy temple.
(1:2)

Listen, you leaders (heads) of
Jacob, you rulers of the house
of Israel. Should you not
know justice, you who hate
good and love evil... (3:1-2)

Listen to what the Lord says:
'Stand up, plead your case
before the mountains; let the
hills hear what you have to
say. Hear, O mountains, the
Lord's accusation; listen, you
everlasting foundations of the
earth.' (6:1-2)

The commanding imperative to listen which is issued first to the whole of creation and all of the nations, then to the leaders of Israel, and finally to the people of Israel, is not followed, as one might expect, by a judicial case but by the Judge's undisputable verdict. No defense is mounted and no rebuttal given, because the sentence of judgment is never in doubt. The evil of Samaria and Jerusalem was indefensible and their capitulation to the gods of money, sex, and power unconscionable. The only thing left was to pronounce judgment:

“Therefore I will make Samaria a heap of rubble, a place for
planting vineyards. I will pour her stones into the valley and lay
bare her foundations. All her idols will be broken to pieces; all her
temple gifts will be burned with fire; I will destroy all her images”
(1:6-7).

This message of judgment gave no pleasure to Micah—only pain. Clearly distraught and grieved, he offered this description of his personal reaction, “Because of this I will weep and wail; I will go about barefoot and naked. I will howl like a jackal and moan like an owl. For her wound is incurable; it has come to Judah. It has reached the very gate of my people, even to Jerusalem itself” (1:8-9).

From Moresheth-gath, Micah could see nine towns comprising a nine mile circle around his hometown (Prior, p.118). Micah used the name of each town to describe the devastating impact evil was having on Judah. His intricate wordplay drew on sound of the name, or the meaning of the name, or the history of the town, as in the case of Gath (1:10; 2 Sam 1:20) and Adullam (1:15; 1 Sam 22:2), places that marked low points in David's life (Prior, p.119). His purpose was to bring the message of judgment home, so that the people of Judah would feel the awfulness of evil and the devastation of God's verdict. If Micah were addressing

us today, he might say,

Don't publicize this on Madison Avenue, laugh it off.
The people of Sacramento are sacked.
Those living in Coronado are homeless.
Chicago's Gold Coast has become a slum.
The people of El Cajon are boxed in.
Hollywood is in mourning, feeling empty and hollow.
Vegas is a ghost town, a home to vagrants.
Philadelphia is the city of brotherly hate.
New Yorkers have lost all confidence.
Brokers are broke on Wall Street.
The bars are closed on Bourbon Street.
The D.C. Beltway is deserted.
The corridors of power are dark.

Micah told the men of Judah to shave their heads bald because their children would go into exile. All their material gain would be lost and they would be taunted by their enemies. Micah said little about why God was "planning disaster against this people" (2:3). He made a passing reference to idolatry (1:7) and delivered a brief, but devastating accusation against them for their greed and economic oppression.

"Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, and a fellowman of his inheritance" (2:1-2)

Micah gave the distinct impression that the reasons for judgment were so obvious and beyond dispute that they hardly needed to be stated. Perhaps, he felt that the case had already been made exhaustively by Isaiah and that all he needed to do was bring it home once again. As expected the message was resisted by the very people who should have supported it. "Do not prophesy, their prophets say. 'Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us'" (2:6). The religious leaders remained indifferent in spite of the fact that women were driven homeless and children were deprived of God's blessing (2:9). The message of the day was "let the good times roll!" "If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for your plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the prophet for this

people!” (2:11).

Micah closes his first cycle of prophesy with a declaration of confidence in Israel’s Shepherd King, who is fully able to gather his people as one flock and break down whatever barriers stand in the way of reconciliation. “Their king will pass through before them, the Lord at their head” (2:13). The closing reference in the first cycle to the Lord’s headship contrasts with the opening theme in the second cycle which focuses on Israel’s leadership. “Listen, you *heads* of Jacob, you rulers of the house of Israel” (3:1).

Present and Future Leadership

Micah’s graphic description of Israel’s political rulers was calculated to shock. They are cannibals torturing and devouring the people they are supposed to serve. They are butchers feasting on their subjects. And the prophets are no better. They are in it for the money. “If one feeds them, they proclaim ‘peace’; if he does not, they prepare to wage war against him” (3:5). Micah refused to be intimidated by this crowd of shameful, evil-loving, good-hating, people-pleasing leaders. “But as for me,” Micah proclaims confidently, “I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression, to Israel his sin” (3:8). *But no matter how bad the situation was, Micah remained confident and hopeful.* His resolve comes through in the third cycle of prophesy when he said, “But as for me, I keep watch for the Lord, I wait in hope for God my Savior; my God will hear me” (7:7).

The root problem among Israel’s leaders was money.

“Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,
and her prophets tell fortunes for money” (3:11).

No sooner had Micah blamed Jerusalem’s inevitable destruction on Jacob’s leaders, than he shifted to the future and looked forward to the last days when the Lord God would establish his temple, his righteousness, and his peace (4:1-5). Micah offered a picture of peace reminiscent of earlier days: “Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid for the Lord Almighty has spoken” (4:4).

In contrast to the self-serving, life-destroying leadership that was currently in

power, Micah prophesied that a new day was coming when the Lord would rule over Zion. “‘In that day,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will gather the lame; I will assemble the exiles and those I have brought to grief. I will make the lame a remnant, those driven away a strong nation.’” The road to future peace clearly passed through the dreaded judgment of exile. Micah identified the agent of that judgment as Babylon. “You will go to Babylon; there you will be rescued. There the Lord will redeem you out of the hand of your enemies” (4:10).

The apparent victory of the nations over Israel however would not be the last word (4:11-13). Israel’s future ruler was to emerge from Bethlehem, an unlikely place to be sure, but one that was in keeping with God’s unusual preference for unlikely choices (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, etc).

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will rule over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (5:2).

Although it might seem to some that God had given up on Israel for good and abandoned her, it would only appear that way “until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites” (5:3). This line was pregnant with far reaching possibilities that only became evident with the coming of Jesus Christ and the outreach of the Gospel to the Gentiles (Jn 10:16; Gal 3:26-29).

However, before Israel would regain its true confidence (5:5-9) and her future king would “stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God” (5:4), Israel would experience terrible judgment. God was determined to remove from his people every form of false security and evil dependency.

“In that day,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will destroy your horses...
your chariots...
your land...
your strongholds...
your witchcraft...
your carved images...
your sacred stones...
your Asherah poles...
your cities (5:10-14).

The second prophetic cycle ends on a comprehensive warning against human self-

sufficiency, false spiritualities, and secular dependencies. In the short term, Israel had nothing to look forward to but heartache, but the situation was not hopeless. It was not too late to respond to the Lord in humility, repentance and obedience. And what was true for them is true for us. As long as the prophetic Word is proclaimed and the Gospel is preached it is never too late to respond to the Lord God. Even though the situation looked bleak, Micah was not about to give up. In spite of being confronted by persistent spiritual indifference, routine violence, daily injustices, corrupt leaders, family disintegration, widespread idolatry, and constant ridicule, Micah persisted in calling people to the Lord. The Lord's verdict of judgment was absolutely true, but hardly the only word and by no means the final word from Israel's Shepherd King.

God's Passion for his People

The third cycle of Micah's prophecy takes on an even greater tone of urgency and intensity than in the two previous cycles. It is as if the people of Israel had been collectively placed on the stand to be cross-examined by the Lord himself, who was determined to get at the bottom of their disobedience, even if it meant subjecting his own actions to scrutiny. The Lord began with a disarming question: "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me."

The Lord then proceeded to mention just a few highlights of salvation history, including the Exodus from slavery, the leadership of Moses, and the incident with Balaam. In all three situations, God saved Israel, from bondage, from themselves, and from the curse of their enemies. In the briefest way possible the Lord was saying, "Remember all those stories about Shittim and Gilgal. Keep all God's salvation stories fresh and present" (6:5, *The Message*). In other words, "Reread the book of Joshua, don't you remember what I did for you? How I established you in the land."

The Lord's second approach followed an entirely different tact. He swung from recalling salvation history to reviewing all the silly, outlandish, human-centered ways Israel had sought to be religious. He rehearsed the distracting religious questions that preoccupied the people and turned religion into an enterprise. "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?" The question only sounded spiritual and sincere. It was, in fact, a self-serving question, designed to feed one's ego and impress others. It implied that God could be bought. If everybody else in the city had their price, then why not the Lord? (David Prior, p.175).

The questions that follow are posed sarcastically. They are delivered in a mocking tone. “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” The value of the sacrificial system depended on the mercy of God, not the price of the calf. The sacrifice did not become more special by feeding a calf for a year, when a much younger calf would serve just as well (seven day old calves were eligible for sacrifice). It smacked of pious excess, something that only the rich would dream of doing. Apparently, extravagance knew no limits in Micah’s day, especially when it came to religious piety. “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?” It is such a human weakness to swoon over numbers and to be impressed with what the world finds impressive. We so easily fall into the trap of replacing obedience with the show of sincerity and authentic repentance with a pious performance. Numbers have a way of numbing our mind to the real issues involved in pleasing the Lord, such as humility and obedience to his commands.

False piety and man-centered religion invariably competes with the Lord God for the ultimate sacrifice. “Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” The fact that such a question could be entertained shows to what extent paganism impacted Israel’s religious life. But it was more than a perverted thought, it was an actual fact. Following their pagan neighbors the Israelites practiced child sacrifice much to God’s horror (2 Kings 16:3).

The answer to these rhetorical “religious” questions, that only served to distract the soul and feed the ego, was obvious. Coming from the mouth of Micah, rather than one of Judah’s enterprising priests who delighted in such questions, the listener was bound to see the contrast between empty, self-righteous piety and true God-honoring righteousness. It was patently clear that no one could buy their way into good standing with God, nor devise their own means of pleasing God.

Against all these religious questions, Micah simply said, “He has showed you, O man, O woman, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?” And then in the briefest and most concise way possible he answered the question, “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humble with your God” (6:8). In doing so, Micah drew on the powerful prophetic tradition that went back to Samuel when Israel’s first prophet confronted Saul for disobeying God and sacrificing the “best sheep” taken in the war with the Amalekites (1 Sam 15:15). Samuel’s unambiguous challenge laid down the truth that has always held true:

“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22).

King David’s confession reminds us of this truth when he prayed,
“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifice of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”
(Ps.51:15-17).

Perhaps, Amos voiced it most passionately when he boldly declared the word of the Lord:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” (Amos 5:21-24).

It is said again by Hosea (6:6) and preached on by Isaiah (1:11-18). It is the truth that underscored Jesus’ ministry, causing him to say to those who challenged him, “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mt 9:13; see 12:7). Micah’s one line description of God’s expectation is consistent with our Lord’s summation of the commandments: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Mt 22:37-40). If we are going to stay in the story, God’s true Salvation History Story, we have to get this message down and obey it with all our heart.

Micah’s One-Liner

The apparent simplicity of Micah’s one-liner should not fool us into thinking that we can reduce the word of the prophet to our understanding of justice, mercy and humility. We cannot isolate these words and define them according to the spirit

of our times or our own private opinions. Albert Einstein is quoted as saying, “Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.” All that Micah said about justice and all that Yahweh’s covenant meant by mercy and all that the majesty and holiness of God implied about humility lies behind this memorable one-liner. It recalls the apostle Paul’s one liner to the church at Corinth, when he said, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). By describing the focus of his ministry in this way, the apostle had no intention of reducing the impact of the Cross to an abbreviated plan of salvation. As he went on to demonstrate in the course of his epistle, the message of the cross applied practically and specifically to every conceivable area of the believer’s life. Therefore, we do not want to reduce Micah’s famous line to a motto or a platitude. It is not a saying that sounds good, but a powerful declaration of what is good. “He has showed you, O man, O woman, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?”

“To act justly” means to live according to God’s standard of justice and righteousness and not our own. God’s righteousness defines what is just and true. To act justly means not to act selfishly. Rather than lying awake at night plotting how we might get ahead or get even, we spend our waking hours pursuing God’s will. Our action plan is not about how much we can achieve or acquire for ourselves, but how we can be used by God to set things right in ourselves, in our families, in our vocations, and in every aspect of our lives. This pursuit of God’s justice and righteousness is pro-active, disciplining and directing our time and energy to right wrongs, overturn injustice, and accomplish God’s will.

“To act justly” is the opposite of acting passively. We are called into action by the explicit commands of God, not by special invitation, much less by special visions. We do not need a special call from God to help the weak, identify injustice, deliver the oppressed, protect the innocent, challenge the bully, expose evil, provide for the widow, pay people their due, and guard each person’s dignity. To act justly is the opposite of acting busy. We are not called to go through the motions, pretending to ourselves and others that we are busy. To act justly is to “take from our souls the strain and stress” of empty activity and “let our ordered lives confess the beauty of [God’s] peace” (John Whittier, “Dear Lord and Father of Mankind”). Jesus summarized what it meant to act justly when he said, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ for the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these

things will be given to you as well” (Mt 6:31-33).

“To love mercy” means that God’s covenant love shapes our self-understanding and our relationship with others. Mercy stands for God’s redemptive love and only those who have received God’s mercy love his mercy. As Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy” (Mt 5:7). Mercy is not to be confused with moral compromise or a tolerance for evil. Mercy does not condone wrong behavior or look away from sin. There is nothing inconsistent with acting justly and loving mercy. Mercy holds to God’s judgment, as Micah’s prophecy affirms so strongly, but it also believes in God’s redemption. This is the mercy that God symbolized when he covered the Ark of the Testimony with the mercy seat (Ex 25:17f). It meant that the relationship between God and his people was based exclusively on his redemptive love. God’s mercy rests on his atoning sacrifice for our sins. Mercy depends on the finished work of Christ’s cross.

The fact that Micah continued to hammer away on the theme of judgment was not inconsistent with his love of mercy. The prophet reiterated God’s just judgment against those who were consumed by greed, injustice, idolatry, violence and deception (6:9-7:6). “But as for me,” Micah declared, “I keep watch for the Lord, I wait in hope for God my Savior; my God will hear me.” Micah looked forward to both God’s judgment and God’s redemptive mercy, and it is upon this truth that his prophecy closes.

“Who is God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show *mercy*. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show *mercy* to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago.”

To love mercy means that we know we have no one else to turn to but God. It means that we identify with the two blind men who called out to Jesus, “Have mercy on us, Son of David!” (Mt 9:27). We see ourselves in the Canaanite woman who approached Jesus on behalf of her daughter saying, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!” (Mt 15:22). We are like the tax collector in Jesus’ parable who “would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God have mercy on me, a sinner.’” (Lk 18:13). For us to love mercy means that we see ourselves as sinners and God’s mercy as our only means to salvation.

“To walk humbly with [our] God” says something profound about the pace, purpose and partnership of our lives. Micah’s thought is simple enough for a young child to grasp and challenging enough for the most mature believer to apply. If the pace is not a race, but a walk, and the purpose is not for accomplishment, but for fellowship, then Micah’s final phrase emphasizes our personal relationship with the Lord. This of course, does not disqualify the imagery of the race used by the author of Hebrews to describe the Christian life nor does it take away from the effort involved in pursuing justice, but it does emphasize that our communion with God depends upon our devotion to God rather than our deployment by God. God is not half as interested in our work as he is in our fellowship. In the economy of God our partnership with God takes precedence over our production for God any day.

The purpose of this partnership is characterized by only one word, *humility*. The emphasis on humility is especially striking when one thinks of all the words that Micah might have used to describe our walk with God. If he had said that we should walk *enthusiastically* extroverts would have it made, or if he had said that we should walk *thoughtfully* than intellectuals would have an edge, or if he had said that we should walk *vigorously* then the weak would have been left out. But the one word that truly fits every person’s partnership with God is humility. This is not a partnership of equals. In our relationship with the Lord we are all unequally yoked, but that does not lead to our humiliation but to our fulfillment. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Mt 11:28-30). If humility is the hallmark of our walk with God we will earnestly seek to follow God’s direction rather than our own. We will not take ourselves too seriously, we will take God seriously. That is the essence of Micah’s prophecy.

