

Micah 6

God of Justice: Our Best Religion

Jonathan M. Romig

CornerstoneWestford.com / February 16, 2019

Today is the last sermon I'm preaching in our series on Micah. Next week my friend from seminary is finishing us up. He loves the Bible and has sat in on a few classes with Terry so I hope you'll come and listen. But since this is my last week in our *God of Justice* series I really want to sum up what it's all about. Our passage actually does a great job of this.

In verses 1-2 the Lord God says he is bringing an “indictment” against his people. What that means is that God is bringing “a formal charge or accusation of a serious crime.”¹ He's calling all of creation—the mountains, the hills, the very “foundations of the earth” to act as his witnesses. You can imagine the courtroom scene. God doesn't call people to the witness stand, but mountains and hills, the high-places where the people offered sacrifices to their false idols. And what are the charges?

- **Micah 1** - Idolatry (not loving God)
- **Micah 2** - Injustice (not loving neighbor/abuse of the poor/stealing land and homes/false prophets)
- **Micah 3** - Misuse of power (rulers/prophets/priests)

Despite their sins God promises **hope** and blessing will come:

- **Micah 4** - Day of justice and peace (temple/Zion)
- **Micah 5** - A just and good King (the Shepherd King/Jesus)

And then we come to the last two chapters.

- **Micah 6** - What God really wants (and what he doesn't want)
- **Micah 7** - Place your hope in the Lord (the closing theme)

In Micah 6 we're going to encounter God's judgment and call to repentance once again. In verses 3-5 God says, “What have I done to you?” He knows human nature. When things go wrong for us what's one of the first things we do? We blame God. “I don't believe in God anymore because this bad thing happened...” But God says, “Look how I've been faithful to you.” He reminds the people that he gave them Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead them out of bondage in Egypt, and when the king of Moab tried to curse the Israelites, God used the prophet Balaam to bless them instead (Gen 12:2-3; Num 22-24). When we're tempted to blame God when things go wrong we also need to remember how he's been good to us. Time and time again God has been faithful and good to his people and how do people respond?

This part is important because the way the Israelites respond to God's goodness is sometimes the way we respond to God's goodness to us. The Israelites had this beautiful history of God's grace to them year after year. They had a wonderful temple. They had God's presence. And what do they think God wants? Verses 6-7 tell us they think God wants their best sacrifices, their wealth, and their children.

¹ indictment. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/indictment> Accessed 2/14/2019.

6 With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

What the people are offering is their best religion. They are offering their prayers and religious duty like sacrifices. They're offering their wealth. Their even offering to sacrifice their own children if that's what it takes. That tells us something. They've gotten it wrong. They're confused and maybe we are too.

Do you ever think something is going to be one way and it turns out to be completely different? I watched a trailer for a movie on Netflix recently. It made the movie look like a cool action-packed apocalyptic end of the world movie, but it was actually a slow-paced melodrama. Sometimes we get it in our mind that what God wants is our best religious practices but the reality is completely different.

God doesn't want our best religion.

God doesn't want our religious acts. He's not interested the kinds of things we normally associate with being a good Christian. He doesn't want our prayers and Bible studies. He doesn't want our tithes and offerings. He doesn't want our worship songs, volunteering, and church attendance. He doesn't want those things... "if" (important "if") "if" we do those religious acts without caring for the poor and needy. God doesn't want our best hypocrisy. That means acting religious but ignoring our neighbor's needs.

I've been reading *Micah for You* by *Stephen Um*, who is the Pastor of [Citylife Presbyterian Church](#) in Boston, and he links our passage with a parallel passage in Amos.

Amos 5:21-24

21 "I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
22 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.
23 Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
24 But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream! (NIV®)

According to Amos the Israelites were also levying taxes on the poor and oppressing the innocent and taking bribes so that the poor didn't get justice in the courts (Amos 5:11-12 paraphrase). Then these same people are celebrating their religious festivals. They're going to temple. They're giving their tithes. They are religious but corrupt. In Jesus' time they're still doing the same thing and Jesus can't stand it.

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (NIV®)

God doesn't want our best religion. He doesn't want us to sing his praises in church if the rest of the days of the week we are living like he's dead. He doesn't want our prayers if we're abusing our employees or if we're ignoring the single mom and orphans (Isa 1:17; Mic 2:9). He doesn't want us to give money at church if we're not directing any of it to the least of these (Matt 25:31-46).

Bernie came up with a powerful illustration. Thursday was Valentine's Day. Wives, do you like it when your husband buys you roses? How would you feel about the roses and him if you found out he was having an affair with the florist? You would hate it! God doesn't want our best roses if our hearts are far from him, if we're having an affair with religion but neglecting the least of these. So what does he want?

God doesn't want our best religion but our justice.

Here we come to our foundation verse, to the verse that really sums up the whole message of Micah.

Micah 6:8

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. (NIV®)

What's more important to God than our best religion? He wants us to show justice to the poor and oppressed and needy and broken and downtrodden. Keller points out that justice isn't just about punishing those who have done bad things but also about helping those in need. Who are those people in our culture? They're the drug addicts, the single moms, the divorcees, those in poverty, foreigners and immigrants who don't speak English, people who don't fit in, those in prison, panhandlers and alcoholics. You name it...

I listened to a sermon by Pastor Timothy Keller on "Doing Justice and Mercy." He brought up Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25. At the final judgment Jesus is going to separate the sheep to his right side and the goats to the left. And he'll say this to the sheep, the true believers.

Matthew 25:34-36 "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. 35 For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, 36 I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' (NIV®)

The sheep are confused because they don't remember doing these things for him. There's hope in that—that God counts as righteous things we don't remember. And in verse 40 Jesus says that they were doing these good deeds to fellow believers who were in need. Then Jesus will turn to the goats.

Matthew 25:41-43 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. 42 For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43 I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' (NIV®)

The goats are just as shocked as the sheep, but they will have no excuse before Christ.

Matthew 25:45 "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' (NIV®)

Keller said something like this in his sermon, “If you don’t have a relationship with the poor you don’t have a relationship with God.” I was really convicted this week because I do a lot of ministry activities and very little to care for those who are poor and at risk. I can’t say that I have a relationship with the poor right now. I don’t want to face that final judgment yet because I want to change. Do you feel that way too? How might we together go out of our way to serve the needy around us? It’s not going to “just happen.” It’s something we need to be intentional about. The kids going to France are called “intentional campers” because they each need to intentionally go out of their way to be with the French kids. We need to be “intentional care givers” in our community—intentionally finding and caring for people in need.

I think our benevolence fund is a great start to caring for those going through times of need within our own church, our family in Christ, which Jesus cares deeply about. Now we just need to actually use it to do that. If you’re someone in our church who needs financial help, please ask any of the Deacons about the fund and what it’s for. We also have meal train opportunities to help out and I know we help each other with childcare. The Missions Team is tasked with one day developing an adoption fund similar to the benevolence fund. Let’s pray for that. I believe Christ loves it when we serve each other within our church.

But what about those outside our church? That’s why I’m excited about *Safe Families*. Our family and one other family has signed up. Will you join us? We haven’t helped our first family yet, but when we do the more people who are registered the easier it will be. On February 4th two representatives from Habitat for Humanity of Lowell met with me to talk about their program. They’re building a house right now in Westford and could use any help we could give, even a few hours of building. Maybe instead of picking up trash along our street again we go help build a home for a needy family. Maybe the Lord isn’t calling us to that but he’s going to lay it on our hearts to do something else for the poor in our community. God cares deeply about them. *God doesn’t want our best religion but our justice.* But that’s not all.

God doesn’t want our best religion but our justice and mercy.

In Micah 6:8 God calls us to “love mercy.” That is the NIV translation. The ESV translates it “love kindness.” This word is the Hebrew word “hesed,” which really isn’t talking about human love. It’s talking first about God’s love for his people—his covenant love. It’s like the love a husband and wife have for each other when they recite their wedding vows. By using hesed God is reminding his people of how much he loves them and has been faithful to them and has been patient with them. And he’s saying, “Now you go and do likewise.” Be loving and kind and merciful as I’ve been those things to you.

There’s no clearer a place where we see God’s mercy and lovingkindness towards us than the cross. That is the ultimate demonstration of a merciful God. Do you know the story? It’s the story of a rich king becoming poor and identifying himself with the least of these, the criminal and condemned. It’s the story of a poor man dying to save his oppressors. That’s the gospel. That’s Jesus.

Isaiah 53:7-8

7 He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
8 By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished. (NIV®)

Jesus was oppressed. He was afflicted. He was innocent. He had every right to stand up and shout “that’s not right!” But instead he allowed himself to be lifted up on two beams of wood so that he could take away our judgment and condemnation (Rom 8:1). Jesus, we want to be merciful to the least of these just as you were merciful with the least of us. Thank you for taking my sins. Thank you for rising from the grave to transform my life, to transform my heart and give me the desire to care for others. *God doesn’t want our best religion but our justice and mercy.* And...

God doesn’t want our best religion but our justice, mercy, and humility.

We don’t have to have it all figured out. Micah calls us to “walk humbly with your God.” That implies this is a journey. We’re figuring it out. Maybe you have been buying your roses for God from the wrong place. Your heart and your actions have been far from him. You haven’t been caring for the least of these. This is a journey. They’re time to till a patch of dirt in your backyard and to plant and water the finest of roses that God will be pleased with. How do we do that? We begin by asking the Holy Spirit to change our hearts so that we can live differently, so that we will seek justice and mercy for the poor, needy, and oppressed. And we do this together, as a community, as a church. The more gardeners the more wonderful the garden. *God doesn’t want our best religion but our justice, mercy, and humility.*

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to [sermons](#) or to read [our story](#).