



What Does the Lord Require?

SESSION 1

| *What the Lord wants from us is a way of acting and doing that is centered in relationship with God and others.*

Introduction

The book of Micah is one of the earliest prophetic writings. It is named for a prophet, but little is known about this man. The book contains the words of the Lord that Micah spoke to the people in a very difficult time. At that time Assyria was a powerful threat and by 722 BCE the northern country of Israel would be destroyed, and Judah was a virtual prisoner of the much stronger Assyria. The region went from prosperity to economic and social ruin in fewer than sixty years. Micah named the evils of the people and called the people to repent and return to the Lord.

The passage that is the focus of this study is understood by many as a central biblical principle for how to live as one of God's own. It captures some of the essential themes of the prophets. It speaks about how God wishes for all to live and thus has become a well-known and much-loved text. These three sessions will explore this brief statement to learn of its far-reaching meaning for life lived long ago and life lived today. The text has withstood the test of time and has more to teach than may seem visible on the surface:

[God] has told you, O mortal, 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?

Micah 6:8

The Text in Context

Prophets use powerful illustrations to get their points across. The verse that is the subject of our study comes



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in chapter 6. Micah uses the example of a court of law with the Lord as the prosecutor and the mountains, hills, and foundations of the earth as the jury (vv. 1–5). The Lord has been hurt by the actions of the people and cries, “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!” God then continues by reminding the people of the ways God has saved them. This scene shows the people that human rejection and sin hurt God. God is not some autocrat but a loving caring God who wants a real relationship with the people. This relationship costs God a great deal of pain when the people turn away.

The change from God's speech to another voice in verse 6 is surprising to a modern audience but is typical in ancient oracles. The prophet is speaking for the people. The words appear as “I” statements because the prophet paraphrases what a person says upon entering the gates of the temple to offer a sacrifice to God (v. 6). Note the irony: in verses 1–5, God takes extraordinary measures to make the people understand that they have ruptured the covenant relationship, and their response is to do the very same things that they always do! Verse 6 is not a comment on sacrifice per se, but it demonstrates how the people ignore God's hurt and go about

their religious business as if everything is normal. Verse 7 is the crux of this strained relationship. The prophet tells them that thousands of sacrifices or the very life of a child cannot atone for God's pain. The giving of a child as a sacrifice is prohibited by biblical law but was practiced in the region under extreme circumstances of national emergency. The reference to child sacrifice here is used not to condone the practice but as an example of the most extreme act one can offer an angry god in the hope of finding favor. At the end of verse 7, it appears the relationship between God and the humans is irretrievably severed. Nothing the humans bring will restore this fracture. The people, it would seem, are doomed. This is the background to our focus text. The relationship is broken, and all of the normal worship ways, even if done thousands of times and to the greatest extreme, cannot appease God.

What Does the Lord Require?

Verse 8 explains exactly what God wants, and what God wants is not an offering but a way of life. The ways expressed are within the grasp of all humanity and, if lived out, become a disciplined way of life that will set the Lord's people against many of the powers of the world. For those who follow God, worship and a person's actions in the world are one and the same. This was cemented at Mount Sinai, where the people worshiped God after their escape from Egypt and God gave them the Ten Commandments. From that point on, love of God and care of neighbor were forever linked to worship of the Lord.

Both Isaiah (1:10–17) and Amos (5:21–24) warn that worship without a just society is worse than no worship at all. This concept is so deeply embedded in Israel's theology that it is reflected in the language. The Hebrew word *ʿebed* means both "servant" and "worshiper," and the related verb means both to serve and to worship, so in this ancient world to serve God was to worship God and vice versa. Ancient Israelites could not separate faith from politics or culture. Service was worshiping God. Indeed, this is the life path required to obey the Ten Commandments and all of the laws and the prophets. This is the way that Jesus Christ lived his life.

What Is Justice?

The first act that the Lord requires is a much broader concept in Hebrew than it appears in the English lan-

guage. The exact phrase should be rendered as "to do or make justice." But what does this mean? How does one go about doing and making justice? First from the biblical sense, justice is not a human characteristic or something that humans can create. Psalm 72 is a hymn asking for God's blessing on the king, and it asks for God "to give the king *your* justice"; likewise Psalm 97:2 notes that justice and righteousness are the foundations of God's throne. Justice, true justice, is both an attribute of and a gift from God.

In addition, in most cases where an English Bible uses the word *justice* or *judgment*, these are the same word in Hebrew! God's judgment in Hebrew theology is not so much a punishment as it is the bringing of justice to an unjust world. Psalm 98:9 explains: "[God] will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity." God's coming into the world will bring the full measure of God's justice, and this is indeed good news.

If justice is pure gift, then how can humans do or make justice? Isn't it the case that justice is impossible for humans, and we need to wait for God to come again and set things right? The answer is yes *and* no. Yes, the full measure of justice will be seen only when the kingdom of God is fulfilled in the coming of Christ. But this full measure does not mean that we simply sit on our hands until then. On the contrary, the Bible provides several ways the word *justice* is used that can help us to understand how to do and make justice in our own world.

Justice as a Community Norm

The Bible presents a vision of a world where God's kingdom reigns. The foundation of this kingdom is justice, and we are players who must do justice. A society run justly is a foundational principle in God's world. Doing and making justice is the work of humans who serve in God's kingdom. *Do justice* is an *action verb*. We are to actively work for and find ways for God's justice to be seen. Often this is expressed as concern for the least of society. Psalm 72:12–14 describes how God's servant is to see the world (my translation):

For this one delivers the needy when they call,
the poor and those who have no helper;
is concerned about the weak and the needy,
and saves the lives of the needy.
From oppression and violence this one redeems
their life,
and precious is their blood in his sight.

This care of the weakest is often tied to the period of slavery in Egypt. Deuteronomy 24:17–18 states: “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice. . . . Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.” God cared about and rescued us, and so we are to act as God has acted on our behalf. This is a call not to act out of pity or Christian charity but because we have been in need of justice and redemption. We are asked not to reach *down* but *over* to one who is in need. Jesus stated it clearly, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12), and “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39).

But declaring that justice is the foundation of a society and putting it into practice are often miles apart. Israel always understood that justice was an important foundational principle. Yet the prophets rose to point out the lack of fidelity to God and the lack of real justice. Amos was especially focused on the topic, as he describes the people as ones “who oppress the poor, who crush the needy” (4:1) and “you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground” (5:7). Kingdom living is much more difficult than kingdom speech. That was true for ancient Israel, and it is true for people in all of history. We, like the Israelites, can easily slip into our own comfortable homes and ignore the cries for justice from others. Doing justice requires diligence and intentionality at all levels of society, as the uses of this word in the Old Testament demonstrate.

Justice in the Courts

Another use of the term *justice* concerns the ancient court system. Deuteronomy 16:19 tells judges and officials, “You must not distort justice; you must not show partiality; and you must not accept bribes.” One of the Ten Commandments also focuses on the court system: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” (Exod. 20:16). This is further explained in Exodus 23:1–3:

You shall not spread a false report. You shall not join hands with the wicked to act as a malicious witness. You shall not follow a majority in wrongdoing; when you bear witness in a lawsuit, you shall not side with the majority so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to the poor in a lawsuit.

Justice means to be as fair as possible, and so we do or make justice when we stand for what is right, some-



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times against the majority, sometimes defending the unpopular person or cause, but always assuring that all are treated with equity.

Justice in Legislation

The Hebrew word for justice can also mean “law” or “commandment.” This means that justice is built into the structure of the community via its concepts of law and legislation. For example, Exodus 24:3 states from the Hebrew: “[Moses] recounted to the people all the words of the LORD and all *the justices* [my translation; NRSV: “the ordinances”]. Leviticus 24:22 reads: “You are to have the same justice [my translation; NRSV: “law”] for the alien and the native-born.” From a biblical meaning then, we are to think of the laws of the people as ways of “doing and making justice.” God cares about the ways we shape our society by legislation. Jesus also shows that acting for the good is more important than legislation when he heals a man on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:12). Jesus used the rule of justice for one in need to challenge a law that forbade his restoration on the Lord’s Day. By this and other acts, Jesus challenged all of the laws and the lawmakers who placed doing the law above doing justice.

Justice as Business Practice

Another way we are to do and make justice is through our business with one another. Psalm 112 praises a good person and notes: “It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with *justice*” (v. 5). Deuteronomy 24:14 reminds all: “You shall not withhold the wages of the poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns.” Jeremiah preaches against those who build their wealth unjustly (17:11) and those who are not fair to construction workers (22:13). Proverbs tells that justice is something one is to seek and learn so that “you

will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path" (2:9). "Doing justice" is personal. It is learned from the community and passed on to the next generation. Making justice is part of the life we live every day. We are to act toward others in just ways in business, in church, and in community life.

Justice in Our Lives

The word *justice* appears 445 times in the Old Testament and is used in a wide variety of community practices; all point toward doing justice in all facets of life as a foundational value for the kingdom of God. They also point to the reality that justice is something that should be actively practiced each and every day.

Justice is clearly a gift to us from God. God's ways are just, and it is justice, not punishment, that God desires for us. The more we practice the discipline of justice, the more we grow into being the image of God as the ones God created us to be. Justice means being as concerned for others as we are for ourselves. It is easy to curl up in our own world and to seek justice only for those who are our family and friends and to let justice be a good religious principle but not an action verb. It means standing up against injustice in all forms small and large. It often means fighting against unjust laws and for unpopular causes as Jesus did. It means risking being seen as "bleeding-heart Christians" by others where we work. It also means paying attention to the whole of Micah 6:1–8, which begins with God's pain at human injustice. Why? Because if we actively practice justice in our communities, we will also feel pain. We will suffer personally when we see the injustice of this world. We, like Jesus in the Temple with the money changers, will become frustrated at systems that take advantage of the poor and seem to never change despite our efforts.

Until Christ comes again, our human justice understandings will be imperfect. The Bible offers example after example of human justice that was either wrong or incomplete. We will suffer the same fate. Other Christians will have a different solution to issues of justice, and sometimes two groups will have exactly opposite views on a situation and each claim theirs is just.

When Moses was faced with a difficult decision concerning the community, he took the decision to the Lord (Num. 27:1–11). The discipline of active justice requires prayer and reflection on God's will for the world. We also must remember that we are human and fallible and thus must be open to hearing a new word from God and changing our minds.

Many people wonder why the answers to complex moral and social problems are not found in the pages of the Bible. The people who first heard these words thousands of years ago would not be able to understand much about our world today. Issues such as global warming, racism, and access to health insurance would be incomprehensible. We cannot look to the Bible for definitive answers for today's moral dilemmas, but what we can do is look to the Bible to show us what values are pillars of God's kingdom. Doing justice may have taken different paths through the centuries, but its importance for living good and whole lives has never gone out of style. Doing justice is one of the three things that God requires, and it is our job as kingdom dwellers to make it a focus of our life's calling in Christ.

About the Writer

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