

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

What Does God Require?

Sermon Reflection Notes

The book of Micah sets a courtroom scene very different from how we may think courtrooms are supposed to function. God is taking the whole city of Jerusalem to court, but it's a biased court; the creator of the universe is pressing charges and is both the prosecutor and the judge. The only thing going for the defense is that these are God's own people, the ones God loves. God wants what is best for them. This is unlike a federal case in a federal courtroom because it is about what scholars call **covenant law**, meaning it's not really about breaking the law. It's about breaking a loved one's heart. Micah, on behalf of God, says to the city of Jerusalem, *You have broken my heart. We are in a covenant together and Jerusalem has not held up its end.* So, Micah declares in the corridors of power and authority that "Jerusalem will be plowed like a field." He lays out the case that the power players of the day have taken advantage of the poor, committed idolatry, taken bribes...the list goes on.

But the goal of the trial isn't retribution. The goal is always the restoration of the covenant. And God wants Jerusalem to plead their case. God asks a heartfelt question: *What have I done to you? Why did you treat our relationship this way?* Micah makes a rhetorical answer on behalf of Jerusalem essentially saying "Ok you're right. I messed up. So how do I fix it? A sacrifice? Rams? I've got oil if you want oil. How much is this going to cost me to get back in your good graces?"

Micah's answer to Jerusalem's question begins with the preface *The Lord has shown you what is good.* The Bible is full of stories of a good God who extends mercy and compassion when mercy and compassion are in short supply. The second scripture of the week, from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is commonly known as the Beatitudes. Jesus sees a crowd of suffering people ascending the mountain to listen to him speak and pulls his disciples aside to tell them, in effect, "The world says the people in that crowd are cursed because they are suffering any number of messes. But I am here to tell you, they are not cursed at all. They are blessed because God draws near to them in their suffering. They are the ones nearest the heart of God."

God has shown us what is good. God has shown us mercy and compassion, and so we must be on the side of mercy and compassion. Our default position must always be to stand with those who have no rights or power and who are being treated shabbily by the powerful. Period. The Lord has shown us what is good.

The Hebrew word we translate as 'require' is **darash**. It is not really about something required like homework, or paying bills. Darash leans more toward the way a flower requires sunshine and rain, or a child requires a mother's embrace. This kind of requiring is about what is *needed to thrive*. The Hebrew word for justice is **mishpat**. Mishpat is not about justice being 'served', about a punishment being given for wrongdoing. Mishpat is about making sure the poor, the outcast, the widow, and the immigrant get a fair shake. If we are to do justice, we must always begin with the question: *Who has no clout?* The Hebrew word **hesed** is often translated as kindness or mercy. Mercy is different from grace; grace is being given a gift you did not deserve. Mercy is withholding punishment that is deserved. To love mercy is to be in

relationship with mercy. Don't relish the power to punish the poor; cherish the opportunity to give someone another shot at kindness---because that is what God has given us, time and time again.

God is ready to plow Jerusalem. To the city dweller it may sound like total destruction. But to the rural Micah, it's how you ready a field for new life. Plowing aerates the soil. It allows roots to grow stronger and deeper. It rids the field of weeds. It allows crops to thrive. God doesn't plow because God delights in destruction. God plows because God wants Jerusalem, and us, to grow and thrive. We too have made a covenant with God. And what does God require of us? Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with our God.

Scripture

Micah 6:1-8

Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the Lord has a case against his people, and he will contend with Israel.

³ "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses,

Aaron, and Miriam. ⁵ O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord."

⁶ "With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high? 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 thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

⁸ He 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?

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Discussion Questions

1. The setting of a trial in humanity is to decide guilt and punishment; it is a place for humans to pass judgement on each other and determine consequences for actions. The church has often taught that God is about judgement and retribution (heaven and hell), but this scripture passage portrays something else. The setting for this trial in Micah is to bring into focus that God is a covenant God. What is the difference between breaking a law and breaking a covenant? How does this change our understanding of who God is?
2. Jerusalem's answer to God's heartfelt question was the simple one: "Yeah, we messed up. What do you want us to do to make it right? Make a sacrifice? Done. Name the price." God's response is harder. What does God require?
3. The Hebrew word *darash* stretches our understanding of the English word *require*. What does it mean according to the Hebrew? What connotations then follow in English?
4. *Mishpat*, justice, in the Old Testament is about ensuring that those without any clout whatsoever are cared for and can live well. *Mishpat* begins, then, by asking: Who has no clout? And what do we do about it?
5. *Hesed*, translated as kindness or mercy, is different from grace. How? How do we 'love mercy'? Ron suggested we need to be in relationship with mercy to do so. What do you think that means?
6. What does mean to 'walk humbly with God'?
7. What work to we need to do to ready ourselves for the 'plow,' for the renewed covenant with God?

Closing Prayer

Covenant making God, you will not leave us alone. You keep calling us to see, to hear, and to know that we have neighbors, brothers and sisters, who are being harmed, who are detained in horrible places, who are being separated from their loved ones, who are being unjustly accused. We read and watch the news, and we are saddened, frustrated, and at a loss as to what we should or can do.

So, help us to see, to hear, to know what it means to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. Give us brave hearts, give us words to speak, and give us courage to walk alongside the neighbors who need our companionship. Turn our memory into hope, our gratitude into energy, and our well-being into impatience. Help us to keep covenant with you and with each other. We pray in the name of Jesus, who called our neighbors blessed. Amen.

"What does God require? Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God."