

What God Wants – Notes From After The Sermon

“You can’t handle the truth!” is what God, through Micah, was saying to the 8th century Israelites, and what he says to us now It’s the truth of what God has done for us balanced against the truth of what God wants from us.

Who was Micah? Micah prophesied near the end of the 8th century BC. By 722, the Assyrian army had already defeated the northern kingdom of Israel. Now the southern kingdom of Judah is at risk. Micah 1:1 tells us Micah was a prophet in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. What do we know about these kings? Jotham reigned for 16 years, but during most of his reign his father was still alive. How did that happen? His father, Uzziah, thought, as king, he had the authority to enter the Temple with the same authority as a priest, and for that he was struck with leprosy. Given the way leprosy was viewed, Uzziah could not continue to rule. Jotham’s reign, after his father died, was short – he was deposed in favor of his son, Ahaz, by a pro-Assyrian faction. Ahaz reigned for 16 years and is described in the Bible as an evil king. Ahaz sacrificed his eldest son to the god Molech and he stripped the Temple of its gold and silver and sent it as a gift to the king of Assyria. Under Ahaz, Judah became a vassal state of Assyria. This meant that the Israelites in Judah were forced to worship the Assyrians gods. Under Ahaz, those who curried favor with the Assyrians became wealthy and politically powerful. So now enter the last king named, Hezekiah. Hezekiah was one of the most prominent kings of Judah and is mentioned in the book of Kings as being a very righteous king. Hezekiah inherited a kingdom subject to Assyria and bankrupted by his father; but, to get out from under Assyrian rule, and with the Assyrians laying siege to Jerusalem, Hezekiah bankrupted his kingdom further by paying a huge tribute to Assyria. I am not saying getting free of the Assyrians was necessarily a bad idea. While Hezekiah did institute sweeping religious reforms and removed false gods from the Temple, who do you suppose most paid the highest price for Hezekiah’s actions? It wasn’t the rich. It was the poor, the weak, and the marginalized.

So now two prophets appear throughout the land of Judah. The first you will all have heard of ... Isaiah. Big name prophet ... big book named after him. Big

sweeping prophecies – saw God high and lifted up. Isaiah who prophesies about the Messiah who is to come. That Isaiah. And then there was Micah. Micah's prophecies consist of denunciations against the rich and passionate defenses of the poor. Most of the book of Micah focuses on proclamations against those who cause social and economic injustice; and throughout most of the book, Micah is ignored.

So that brings us to Ch. 6, verses 1-8. This is courtroom drama. When court is called into session, the roles are assigned. "Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel." God is bringing the case – he is the government, the state, the plaintiff. Micah is the prosecuting attorney. The mountains, the hills and the depths of the earth are the jury. And the people are the defendants.

So what is the charge? Usually a charge is a proclamation of a crime – and there are charges laid against those in political, social, and economic power in the book of Micah. But even though God levels the charges, he does so in an almost apologetic way. From v. 3: "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!?"

Then God gets to the heart of the matter. Since the time of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 15, he and the people of Israel have had a covenant relationship. In Gen. 15, God came to Abraham (then called Abram) and told him – "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be. I am the Lord ... and I give you this land to possess." This was a promise repeated to Abraham throughout his lifetime, reminding Abraham: "This is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations; I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you. As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations." This same covenant became a covenant with us through the death of Jesus, so we now stand in this same relationship.

What does God say, through Micah, of the state of this covenant? God asks, almost pleads, "What have I done?" And, of course, the answer is God has done everything and He has done nothing; He is innocent. He has kept up his end of the

bargain and verses 4 and 5 are a reminder. God reminds Israel that he brought them out of the land of Egypt. He reminds them of what King Balak of Moab devised and how Balaam answered him. If you are not familiar with that story, it is in the book of Numbers, starting in chapter 22 and continuing through chapter 24. The Israelites were camped in Moab across the Jordan River from Jericho. Balak, the king of Moab, sent for Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet-for-hire, to come to him and curse the Israelites so that Balak could then defeat them in battle. But later that same night, God appeared to Balaam and told him not to go to King Balak saying, "You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." After hearing of Balaam's refusal, Balak sent messengers back to Balaam offering him anything he demanded to get him to come and curse the Israelite people. Completely contrary to nature, Balaam's response was, "Although Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the Lord my God." The story of what Balaam did, continues for 2 more chapters but the key is that along his way Balaam had a personal encounter with God that changed his message. Finally, Micah, as prosecutor, reminds the people of "what happened from Shittim to Gilgal." What does that mean? Shittim was the last camp of the Israelites on the east side of the Jordan and Gilgal was its first camp on the west bank. So, this is a reminder of the entrance into the promised land under Joshua. These reminders sum up the prosecution's case.

So, what happens next? Normally in a trial the case now shifts to the defense. But in Micah 6, an unexpected thing happens. The people, hearing the prosecution's case, do not present a defense. In v. 6, the people, recognizing their guilt, ask what they can offer God to make things right, to restore the covenant. They mention 4 things. First, they ask if God will be satisfied with burnt offerings of calves. Thinking that is not adequate to pay for their guilt, they next ask if God will be satisfied with thousands of rams. Third, they ask if ten thousand rivers of oil will be sufficient. And finally, their guilt is so great that they ask if the death of their firstborn will be sufficient to pay the price. As I said earlier, human sacrifice was not unknown – remember Hezekiah's father, King Ahaz, had sacrificed his oldest son to Molech. In Canaan, where they were living, it was common. But not for Israelites – not since Abraham and Isaac hundreds of years before.

Think about that for a minute. How could they be so wrong about God? How is it that these people have been in a covenant relationship with God for over a

thousand years and they still don't get it? But remember, we have had that same covenant relationship since the death of Jesus 2,000 years ago. And we don't get it either.

Because in v. 8, Micah tells the people what God wants from them – and what God wants from us. What does the Lord require of you?

First, to do justice. That's an odd phrase. Do justice. To do justice means not to just want justice, but to work for justice. Live our lives to make the world a fairer, more honest, more equal place.

Second, to love kindness. Not just to be kind, but to love kindness. Fall in love with showing kindness to others.

Third, to walk humbly with our God. The third requirement really should be the first, because if we walk humbly with our God we will do justice and love kindness. But walking with God does just mean calling on God on our terms, it means walking with him 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

What does the Lord require of us? If you mean it, say it with me.

To do justice.

To love kindness.

To walk humbly with our God.

Or to summarize: Love your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. Matthew 22:37-38.