

What Shapes Our Faith?

Micah 6:8

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Randy Lovelace

We are beginning a series in the book of Micah. This is the first sermon in the prophet Micah's work. And as you turn there, if you have your Bibles with you, you can turn them on or simply look at the screen in front. But before I read any of it, I want to give a brief explanation regarding the prophet Micah and the work that he was doing.

Micah was, if you will, a country boy. Micah was from a town about 20 miles outside of Jerusalem. So he was really called as a country boy to go and minister in the city. And what that meant was that he was having to do it during a time which was particularly difficult. It is not a time that was unusual in that he also served alongside his contemporaries of Isaiah as well as Amos and Hosea. But what's interesting about Micah is that while he was a country boy, and even some of his language was a bit more rugged than the language and eloquence of Isaiah, he was definitely no dummy. He knew exactly what God was calling him to do, and he knew the difficulty of what God was calling him to do.

And Micah was ministering in the midst of Jerusalem under siege. So he was called to the city to call out and to prophesy to not only the people of Israel, but also its leaders both political and religious. But he was doing so in the midst of Jerusalem being surrounded by the enemy of Assyria and the gathering armies. And so he was particularly called to prophesy on behalf of God to the people of God in the midst of real trial and suffering.

We'll get deeper into the book of Micah in this month of July. Now, what's interesting is we will learn that he was actually given a really interesting message. And it's given to us in several different oracles. Sometimes it's given in this pattern, an oracle of doom, also an oracle of hope. God's word is consistent. It never just ends in an oracle of judgment or doom, but it always leads to an oracle of hope. But that's particularly hard for Micah to do when the city to which he was called to prophesy is under siege of a foreign enemy. What would God have him say?

The heart of his message is actually Micah 6:8. So I'm going to read this passage this morning, and then we'll look a little bit deeper as we go along together. Hear now God's word, Micah 6:8.

He has told you, O man, 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?
[ESV]

Let's pray together.

Father, we now ask that you would take your word and plant it on our hearts. And may your Spirit equip us, strength, and call us to walk with you according to your grace, according to your mercy, and according to your justice that it might please you and that we might walk faithfully trusting in you as you have called us. Help us, O Lord. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

Before we go any further in looking at this passage which is very familiar to many, in fact, it's perhaps a memory verse some have learned in becoming Christians as it is easy to memorize, as I was preparing for this Sunday's sermon, I was reminded of the work of Dr. Bruce Waltke, a wonderful Old Testament scholar. As he describes this passage, he reminds us of something which is very close to us here in this region. And as a photographer, I particularly love the Library of Congress. If you've never been to the Library of Congress, it is an absolutely gorgeous architectural venue. And as you walk in, there's the images of the grand reading room. And it is truly grand and completely restored. But the entire facility is just one hallway after another that takes your breath away.

But just outside the grand reading room are a series of alcoves. And at the time it was being designed, architects and designers sent out scholars to go to each one of the areas of the humanities to

ask how would you want one of these alcoves to be designed? And what would you want it to say that would summarize this particular area of humanities? And religion is still, and was, and I think should be considered a part of the humanities. And so they went to the religious leaders of the day and asked, what would be a quote that would summarize the work of religion itself? And if you go to that alcove today, you will see emblazoned there Micah 6:8. And it was intended, they thought, to be a summary of religion.

So as you go there, if you're a confessing Christian, you'll go through the alcoves and you'll get to the one for religion and say, Micah 6:8, isn't that great? But I would encourage you to think about why you might think that is great. And I would actually argue that for a Christian, that reaction has more to do with what you're bringing to that conversation than what was intended by that statement being placed there. What we're bringing to the equation is what we mean by the Christian faith, all that God has done and what He has called us to do. But really, what that was meant to do was to summarize all of religion, to do justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. And what that essentially does is it turns religion into simply a list of duties. And that is not what Micah intended.

Micah did not intend for Micah 6:8 to be taken out of its context and memorized on its own to be a simple summary of what it means to be in relationship with a covenant gracious God. What do I mean? Well, just prior to Micah 6:8, we have several verses. And I want to summarize it for you quickly. If you have your Bible, you can look at those quickly.

And this is one of the oracles. And it begins in 6:1 by saying, "Hear what the Lord says." And then what Micah does is he invites the people of God, the leaders, the religious leaders, and the people of Israel to come and bring your indictment to God. You're wondering why God is allowing the Assyrians to attack us? You're wondering why Jerusalem is under siege? If you have an indictment before God, bring it. And so they do. And he says, when you do, please note that the mountains are witnesses to what you are saying. Why would he bring up that idea? Because he wants to remind them that they're finite. They think they know, but they don't know. And the mountains were here before them, and they'll be here after them. Be careful what you say.

And, yet, what is recorded for us, he says, bring your case. Do what you're going to say. He says, "Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth for the Lord has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel." So he knows. He's calling the people to bring their complaint to God, but he doesn't allow it to begin with their complaint. He actually speaks what God wants to say to the nation.

And here's what God says, verse 3,

"O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! 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. O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord."

And so Micah expresses to the people of God that he is reminding them that our God, that their God, is a God of salvation first. And he's reminding them, the people who are ready to bring a complaint against God, what He has done on their behalf.

That's important for us because this is a normal theme throughout scripture. God does not begin with imperative. He begins with indicative. He reminds the people who He is and who they are to Him. This is a familiar pattern even in the letters of Paul to the churches. Consider the what Paul says to the people in Ephesians. God has been gracious to you. Therefore, forgive one another as you have been forgiven. Love one another. Sing spiritual songs to one another. Why? Because this is what the Lord has done for you. So he doesn't begin with imperative. He begins with indicative. And this is the Lord saying, have I not graciously saved you not by your hand, not because you deserved it, not because you were

great, but because of my grace and compassion and mercy? This is the gospel writ large before the coming and the revealing of Jesus Christ. This is God saying, this is how I have redeemed you.

But then what happens? They respond sarcastically to God's appeal that He's saved them. This is what Micah records that the people respond with because this has been their complaint. He summarizes it.

"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? 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?"

They're saying, hey, wait a second. You told us to do these things. We're doing it. In essence, this is what they're saying. Hey, we've been to church. We pray. I read my Bible in the morning. What do you require of me? I've shown up. I've given my tithe. I've helped my neighbor. I've given some good things. Isn't that what you want from me, God?

Then comes Micah 6:8. So what God is saying is essentially, I have redeemed you, and yet your response to me is to look at your outward obedience. What they've done is they've taken the gospel of grace from a covenant-keeping God and turning it into a transactional obedience, I-do-for-you, you-do-for-me action. All the while, what it demonstrates is something that is very scary about the human heart. I can attend to the word of God without attending to the God of the scriptures. I can pray to God but actually not contend with the God to whom I pray. I can be outwardly righteous but inwardly dead. I can show outward closeness but inward distance.

And so God says to their sarcastic questions, "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you," justice, mercy, and humility. Now, I used the word mercy. I apologize. The ESV correctly translates it as loving kindness. But as an NIV 1984 guy, I still have mercy stuck in my brain. So there you go.

So let's work through these three things. Now, remember, this is all based on the indicative first that God has redeemed us. In essence, if you will, if you are familiar at all with Christian doctrine, this is God saying this is how I have justified you, O Israel. This is how I have justified you and called you to myself, Christian. Now, how do I want you to live this out in response to what I have done? You see, this does something very different and something that is actually quite uncomfortable for us. We aren't called to merely go out and do justice and mercy and humility disconnected from who we've been made to be in Christ, nor do we get to merely rely on me, myself, and God or Jesus and not expect that we're also called to do justice, mercy, and humility. They must be taken together because when we don't, we simply flatten the gospel out, and we reduce it either to me, myself, and my forgiveness, or we reduce it to a list of moralism. Be this. Do better. Be good. We are called to do these things as a response to God's gracious, compassionate salvation.

So let's look at justice together. Oftentimes, you've probably heard this word justice, and, particularly in light of this passage, to act justly. In other words, do you see the need for justice? Now, there's something we need to address here. First, the Hebrew word that is translated here, justice, is not first and foremost speaking about the justice that I am to enact between you and me or look out for the justice that is horizontal. First and foremost, it's about doing justice to a covenant-keeping God meaning the justice internally to what God has done for us.

So, first, the word "mishpat" is translated "justice" here which is talking about how we are to do justly to our God, meaning that the reason why I attend to injustice out there, which is why I ought to look to you and to care for you if you are experiencing injustice, is because it is a response to a God who has given nothing but justice. I deserved His displeasure, yet God in His grace and compassion did justice by

His name not silencing His law but fulfilling it by His righteousness. So, now, in response to that, I look to care for your injustice because God did something for me.

So what does it mean? It means I am to make sure that you and my neighbor are to be treated with all goodness, rightness, and justice in every situation of life. If I am a small business owner or a CEO, I am called to be just with those who work for me, Leviticus 19; if I am an employee or an employer, James 5; if I am a spouse or have a spouse or children, Ephesians 5; if I am a citizen of a country, Romans 11; if I am a homeowner, I'm not just to care for myself but I'm also to be aware of how what I do on my property might affect others, Deuteronomy 22.

But, also, we are to take an active role in helping others when we see they are being treated with injustice, in other words, to do whatever good we can for those who are being oppressed. This comes directly from Isaiah 58:10. What this means is I don't get the luxury of simply putting myself in a spiritual closet and not pay attention to things outside the church. And I will tell you that is called the spirituality of the church if we believe that all we're to address is me, myself, and Jesus, and my need of forgiveness. If the preaching of the gospel and the working out of the grace of God does not mean we do not attend to the injustice in the world around us, it makes Christianity a private western individualistic thing. To do justice to a holy compassionate gracious God means I have eyes to see the injustice around me.

People who are the most vulnerable to injustice, the ones to whom we are called by God to pay special attention to are the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the poor. This is seen in Jeremiah 22, James 1, Leviticus 19, and Exodus 23. We do not have the luxury of merely walling ourselves off from the needs of others corporately or individually.

Now, please note you may wonder, is he going there? He might say this. The reason why we think that is because we have not politicized this. It's been politicized in our day. Let's defuse this. But let's be honest, ladies and gentlemen, that we cannot avoid how God intends for us not only to live towards Him but to live in the world around us. And it causes us and will call us to be involved in very uncomfortable conversations. But we do so guided by the justice of God in His grace and compassion as we seek to do justice towards others.

What this means, I believe, is that we need to be aware that God does this towards us when he says, I rescued you out of Egypt. You were nobody. I didn't rescue you because you were a great nation. I didn't rescue you because you were particularly a good people. I rescued you because of my compassion and my mercy.

So what does that say to us? Our God always moves towards us. And isn't Jesus the finest example? He moved towards us in empathy, in love, and He gives us victory. He doesn't just free us from the oppression of sin. He gives us victory over sin and death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it meant that He had to go through Good Friday to do it. We can't get Good Sunday without Good Friday, and we can't have Good Friday without Victory Sunday. God came to us. And that changes, then, how we go and see others.

So let me give you an example of some things to think about. In this particular cultural moment, if we relish in practicing the use of epithets towards those we disagree with instead of moving towards them in empathy, then we know we're not hearing the justice, inherent compassionate justice, of the gospel. If we want to be identified more by our wokeness than by our witness, then we know we're not being guided by the justice of the gospel. If we say we need to trust more in our vote than the victory of Christ, then I'm not being guided by the justice of the gospel. If we would rather see the wielding of the law of the supreme court of the land over using and serving through the love of Jesus Christ, then we're being shaped by something other than the justice of the gospel.

These are just some of the things which we ought to consider and be aware of in this moment, in this day, even in this church, even in your family. Family after family, including my own, we have lots of

divisions. We know we have these things that we need to go and address, and we hurt each other, and we're talking over the top of each other. And I want to maintain to you, church of Jesus Christ, are we being shaped in our conversations and discussions about these matters more by the culture than we are the justice of the gospel? May God have mercy on us and enable us to move towards one another in a very different way because we see how God has moved towards us.

But mercy, not just justice. This idea of mercy isn't just necessarily about what we do. It's also how we give. How do we think about giving to others? This idea of loving kindness is to be the kind of person who delights in showing compassion for people who are in need, when we see people in pain, distress, or misery to step in and to take action to seek to relieve their need. This applies to an entire arena of need. Consider just a couple. Pain, distress, loneliness, depression, anxiety, all sorts of disorders and misery, hurt, brokenness of all kinds, to step in and to say, can I pray for you?

We have many who are struggling during this time with various levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. It will not be solved by being all back in the same room together again. But so many of you have already responded. You've sought to give meals to those around you. You've sought to call up those people you haven't talked to in a while. Yes, it's probably been through Zoom. But Zoom can be really good for this. How can we seek to give mercy? And this has been a time where it has forced many to slow down and to see things, and to move towards people, and to give in ways we haven't thought about in a long time. It is an opportunity to see how the Lord in His mercy isn't just loving and kind. He is vulgar in His grace.

I was reminded as I was preparing this week of Brennan Manning's quote. He was a lapsed Catholic priest who had many issues in his life. And he talked about this idea of vulgar grace. And this is what he says.

"The vulgar grace of God is indiscriminate compassion. It works without asking anything of us. It's not cheap. It's free, and as such will always be a banana peel for the orthodox foot and a fairytale for the grownup sensibility. Grace is sufficient even though we huff and puff with all our might to try to find something or someone, it cannot cover. Grace is enough. He is enough. Jesus is enough."

The realities are that our God in His mercy shows the same mercy to the person who woke up early and showed up to work on time, and He shows mercy to the drunk who showed up at ten minutes till 5:00. God in His mercy pours out His grace to the one who has been in the church and loved the Lord as well as to the murderer who came to Him on death row. God is vulgar in His grace, Brennan Manning says, and I believe that to be the case.

And so when He calls us to be merciful, and this hits me right in the heart, why then are we often so stingy in our mercy? Do you ever feel that? You want to do something, but you're like, well, do they really need it? Will they really receive it? And, well, I don't know. Is my helping going to hurt them? But this calls us to indiscriminate mercy because when you begin to see our compassionate, covenant-keeping, empathetic, and loving God, we see that God is indiscriminate, and gracious, and merciful.

And then that also means that that doesn't just apply to members of our family, members of our neighborhood, but it also applies to our enemies. And Jesus would say this. It's easy to be merciful to the one we know is going to send a thank-you note, the one who might give us another in-kind invitation. But He tells us to love even our enemies. And there we have, again, the vulgar grace of God's mercy that while we were yet His enemies, Christ died for us. Do you hear what God has done for us? And so to do mercy isn't merely some work of being good. No. It's to respond to all that has been given to you and go with this mercy.

The beautiful thing about mercy and grace is that when we tap in and attend to the God of mercy and grace, we never run out ever. We never run out. Left to ourselves, we run out. We get exasperated.

We get defensive. We get impatient. We get unkind. But God in His grace is ready to meet us to give us the grace we need and mercy we need to move towards others.

It's not just justice, not just mercy, but also humility. So justice is how we see. Mercy is how we give. But humility is how we walk. How do we walk in the midst of the world around us? How do we walk in the midst of one another? Is it in the spirit of humility? Is it cynicism? Is it arrogance? Is it self-righteousness?

I don't know about your heart, but I'll speak for mine. I think my heart is far more clothed in self-righteousness than I ever dared to truly admit. What a time for me to see my self-righteousness is during the time of the pandemic. Think about what has happened over the last several months. And if nothing else has taught us, 2020 has reminded us that we have no idea what's going to come at the end of this day or tomorrow or next month. But one thing is for sure. My cynicism and my self-righteousness have been ready like two little crutches. And what it has meant is instead of walking in humility, I recognized early on as God forced me to slow down in what ways I interacting internally but also interacting with others, both on the social media dumpster fire, how I was doing so with arrogance and cynicism, and then privately in my own thoughts or conversations, I recognized how it was ripping me up.

And it has caused me to truly take an honest assessment of the views that I hold and then asking the question, but am I holding them above my need to walk in humility and trust in God or am I elevating these very important things? And they are important. Are they getting elevated above the call to humility? For me, the Lord by His Spirit, thanks be to God, has reset that balance. And I can talk to you later about what that has meant for me.

But one of the ways in which I've been hit square in the heart is the whole idea of what does it look like to walk in humility? Now, I've found this in the larger Catechism of the Westminster Confession. Now, if you're not familiar with the Westminster Confession, it's a confession drawn up by a group of ministers in England about 500 years ago. And they drew it up as a way to ask the question, what does the church believe? So we have this long confession. And it's the church talking to itself. Then outside of that, they created two things called catechisms which are questions and answers. And we have the larger catechism, which is used for the training and examining of ministers, and the shorter catechism, which is used for the training of children. Both are extremely helpful to know what we believe about God, to take us deeper into the word. But it is also something which, if you allow it, will hit you right in the heart of where you are. And I found that place.

And it is in the section of the larger catechism, which is covering the Ten Commandments, and one of them in particular. It says, "What is the ninth commandment?" And it says, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." Now, that may not seem like something that would come up during this time, and particularly in humility. But I think once I read it, I was like, oh yeah.

So it does two things. It talks about the duties that are required by the ninth commandment and the sins that are forbidden. So just briefly consider these. These are the duties, just some of the duties, required by the ninth commandment as they were reflecting on God's word.

"The duties required in the ninth commandment are the preserving and promoting of truth between man and man, the good name of our neighbor as well as our own, appearing and standing for the truth, and from the heart sincerely, freely, clearly, and fully speaking the truth and only the truth, to be charitable in our esteem of others, loving, desiring, and rejoicing in their good name, sorrowing for and covering their infirmities."

To be sorrowful when we see the brokenness and sin of somebody else, and by God's grace, not exposing it but seeking to cover it. We're not ignoring it but covering it, meaning you're not bringing it to light. That's what's required. Those are just a few of the things.

Then it says what are the things that we're not to do, that are forbidden? This is what it says. The sins forbidden in the ninth commandment, these are just some, "All prejudicing of the truth, making sure that the good name of our neighbors is not spoiled, giving false evidence, wittingly appearing and pleading for an evil cause, outfacing and overbearing the truth." Now, remember when it said you're to speak in truth. But remember there is also grace, too. So if you're wielding with the truth, it's like a hammer, so everything's a nail. But you can overdo the truth where you begin to choke other people with it. So it says to be careful. Don't be overbearing with the truth.

"Passing unjust sentence, calling evil good and good evil, rewarding the wicked according to the work of the righteous and the righteous according to the work of the wicked, undo silence in a just cause, holding our peace when iniquity calls for either a reproof from ourselves or the complaint to somebody else, speaking the truth unseasonably or maliciously to a wrong end and perverting it to a wrong meaning, and misconstruing intentions, words, and actions."

So as I read that, what God brought to my mind were the things which I have held against leaders, be it President Trump or President Obama or Bush before him, or the ways in which I have looked on those that I might disagree with, and assuming surely this is what they meant, and then I establish my opinion. What I began to see and what the Lord began to speak to my heart was what was actually shaping my interaction with others and their ideas or leaders? And what it's caused me to do is I've now realized just how I was being guided by my own righteousness and my own arrogance.

And I will tell you in this day in our culture, everything is politicized. Everything is either black or it's white; it's right or it's wrong. You're on the left or you're on the right. It's dividing families that we can no longer talk about these issues, that this is the only right way to think. And instead of moving us towards one another, it's putting us further and further apart.

And then the church just becomes, if you will, like a mind field where we can't talk about these things because we get so energized and we're full of so much tension and so much anxiety. And then the church no longer becomes a place where we can actually have a nuanced dialogue by what's happening around us because what's guiding us is not humility. What's shaping us is the impassions arrogance and the cynicism of our culture.

And so the backbiting, the rumor mongering, and the hurt happens out in the public in social media. If you think that the church is safe from this, I hope you don't. Even over the last few weeks, ministers and ruling elders from reformed bodies of the PCA and the OPC have been exposed for their private Facebook groups where they have been spewing all kinds of improper jokes and words about others who are in their churches. What they thought was in private has now been made public. We are not immune to this. I am not immune to it, and I don't believe you're immune to it.

But what the Lord calls us to is walk in humility. And our humility will stem only from seeing our own need and reception of God's mercy. And Jesus Christ who humbled Himself and made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, emptying Himself of His glory, and yet He came, and He died in our place. God in His grace was poured out reminding us again that the slavery that Israel was freed from in Egypt is even more greatly pictured in the freedom that we have in Jesus Christ in the victory over sin and death. Instead of freeing me to simply go and do as I like, it has freed me, it has shaped me, and it should shape us to be a people of mercy and justice and humility. I don't know what I don't know. And I need to hold even that which I care about so much with an open hand knowing that what I have received and what I need is far greater. The deeds of justice and compassion will not be marked by a motivation of making ourselves feel good or important or righteous, but they will be done as a true expression of the love of God with careful concern for a person's true need and humbly without drawing attention to ourselves.

So what are we called to do? We're called to remember the one who has rescued us from death and brought us into the light, the one who has called us into a relationship, that we do justly towards Him as we seek to respond to His grace in doing justice towards others and mercifully caring in compassion for the needs of others, and by the grace of God alone, walking in humility. May the Lord enable us to do this. May He call us to a different way to address one another and work with one another and love one another. And may the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ flourish during this time of cultural upheaval, world upheaval, because we're not devouring one another, but rather we're seeking to demonstrate the gospel, and justice, mercy, and humility. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for calling us to your word. Father, we thank you for convicting us. And we thank you for the ways in which you have moved towards us in loving kindness, the ways in which you have demonstrated your vulgar grace which, when we are honest, it offends us. But we recognize that that offense has brought to us life. Lord, help us to depend less on ourselves and more on you. Help us to be shaped more by the grace and justice and mercy of the gospel than we are of what we see in the world. May it change us. May it transform your church. May it demonstrate the gospel of grace to the world. And may you change the world according to your purposes. In Jesus's name. Amen.