# DO JUSTICE; LOVE KINDNESS; WALK HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD

SERIES: WHO IS A GOD LIKE THEE?

#### **By Doug Goins**

This chapter of Micah centers around a verse which marvelously summarizes the lifestyle that God would like all of us to reflect.

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

The context of this beautiful, simple summary is particularly interesting because God says these words to the nation Israel in response to an angry, defiant, challenge from his people. Micah is delivering God's message to people who are really, *really*, mad at God. Have you ever been there? Have you ever been really, *really*, mad at God? I have.

Last weekend, the interns and shepherds went away for a retreat. We were sharing the most difficult struggles of faith in our lives through the years, and it took me back to a time a number of years ago when I was really struggling with God. I was hurt and very angry at him. I had experienced tremendous loss in my life and was in great distress. I was wrestling with my sin and my own failure, but at the same time blaming God. I remember pacing around my apartment all alone some evenings, talking out loud to him. I'm sure if somebody had looked through the window, they would have thought I was crazy. I was putting God on trial and cross-examining him about my history with him and the circumstances in my life. I was questioning his faithfulness. I was asking why all these bad things were happening to me. I told him I didn't really trust him, and I didn't even want to have a relationship with him anymore. It's still a painful, vivid memory.

That is the attitude of Judah, the southern kingdom in the 7th century before Christ, as Micah begins this third and final message to the nation. Chapters 6 and 7 are a call for them to trust the Lord, to return to him in loyalty and love, and live in submission to him. But the southern kingdom looks at her recent national history and struggles with it. The people have witnessed the fall of their neighbor to the north, Israel. They have watched the invasion of their own country by Assyria where a number of cities were destroyed and probably 200,000 Judeans had been carried off into exile. King Hezekiah had been required to pay huge sums out of the national treasury in tribute to the Assyrians. Judah knows that God is sovereign over her existence. God is even willing to take responsibility for the disasters in her life. But Judah ends up very bitter at God, complaining, accusing God of violating his covenant relationship with her—a love relationship that wasn't even her idea. God had initiated it.

At the second giving of the Law, Deuteronomy 7, Moses had written this about this love relationship that God had with his people:

For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you and kept the oath which he swore to your forefathers, the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments.... (Deuteronomy 7:6-9)

#### A divine lawsuit

So what does God do when we, like Judah, begin to mistrust his love and live in ways that contradict his law and his

commandments? How does God seek to draw us back into relationship with him when that relationship has been strained, almost to the breaking point? Chapter 6 reveals that God takes this very seriously. When we, like Judah, begin to mistrust his love, he gives us a chance to dialogue with him about it. He is willing to listen to us. Micah 6 is a conversation between God and his people. It begins in a courtroom setting, a place of objectivity, of fairness to both sides. In the first eight verses of chapter 6, God brings a covenant lawsuit against his people. The first five verses focus on God's accusation concerning his people; specifically, their ingratitude. The case is initiated in the first two verses, but the way in which it is initiated is even surprising.

Hear now what the LORD is saying,
"Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
And let the hills hear your voice.
Listen, you mountains, to the indictment of the Lord,
And you enduring foundations of the earth,
Because the LORD has a case against His people;
Even with Israel He will dispute." (Micah 6:1, 2)

In verse 1, Israel is asked to bring her case against the Lord. The word "plead" or "contend" is a legal term and it means to argue a grievance in court against somebody that you are in opposition to legally. God is taking the initiative to clear up these hard issues with Israel and she is given "first crack" at God. But at the end of verse 1, Israel has nothing to say.

In verse 2 in the face of Israel's silence, God speaks in his own defense. The people of Israel think that the problem is God's, but he wants to indict them. They are going to discover very soon that the issue isn't God's unfaithfulness, but *theirs*. In court there is always the opportunity for a cross-examination. We do have the right and freedom to question God, but that right is reciprocal. Look how God defends himself in verses 3-5. God says,

"My people, what have I done to you,
And how have I wearied you? Answer Me.
Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt
And ransomed you from the house of slavery,
And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
My people, remember now
What Balak king of Moab counseled
And what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
And from Shittim to Gilgal,
In order that you might know the righteous acts of the Lord." (Micah 6:3-5)

Remember, we are in court here. But this is not the speech of a prosecutor or even a stern judge. God's indictment is really full of loving concern, *pathos*. What comes through is how deeply he cares about his people Israel. Twice God addresses them as "my people." He has no desire for this love relationship to end. Instead of accusing the people of Judah, instead of listing their failures, God asks them two rhetorical questions about his own failure, what he has done wrong in the relationship. It is as if God is searching his own heart to see if there is some evidence of unfaithfulness on his part or if he has put some unreasonable burden on his people, his covenant partner. He questions why there is such neglect by Israel, why such boredom on her part with God and with the life he called her to.

Now, carefully notice at the end of verse 3, just as at the end of verse 1, there is no response from Israel. When God says, "answer me," which literally means, "testify against me," his angry people have nothing to say to him.

In verses 4 and 5, where God defends himself, his request is that Israel remember history. He defends his past behavior, reciting several of his gracious, redemptive acts on their behalf. He wants them to remember their salvation history and he gives four examples. The first is the exodus from Egypt where they were saved out of bondage under Pharaoh. Second, he says, "I gave you leaders, good leaders, trustworthy leaders: Moses, Miriam, Aaron." Third, God turned cursing into blessing for them. When the king of Moab, Balak, hired Balaam to curse Israel, God made Balaam unable to curse the nation. Finally, the reference "from Shittim to Gilgal" refers to their crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land at flood-tide with God miraculously holding back the water.

These events are an historical revelation of the living God, reminders of his righteous activity on their behalf. He is God, and he *is* faithful, and he desires to continue his righteous actions toward them. The bottom line here is that the people of Judah have no basis for complaining against God. He has faithfully fulfilled his part of this loverelationship in the covenant.

### A defensive response

In the beginning of verse 6, the people finally speak to God, but they speak out of hard hearts, still in deliberate rebellion against him. They do raise the sin issue and talk about their own sin against God, but their questions show how shallow their spiritual life really is. They are ignorant of the enormity of their sins and the high cost of forgiveness. Verses 6-8 summarize a defensive response from an ungrateful nation. Look at verses 6 and 7 when the people speak. Ritual purity can not win God's favor,

With what [they ask] shall I come to the LORD And bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, With yearling calves? Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams, In ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts, The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6, 7)

These aren't really questions, but rhetorical statements in which the people are trying to defend themselves by explaining how faithful they have been to God. They are countering God's "what" question with their own. Look back at the beginning of verse 3, "My people, what have I done to you?" God asks. They respond in verse 6, "With what shall I come to the Lord?" And when we get to verse 8, God is going to answer with his own "what" again. "He has told you, O man, what is good...."

In this interchange between God and his people, there are several problems of dissonance in the interaction. First, God's approach is warmly relational and very personal: "My people," he calls them directly, "remember what we've been through together?" But Israel is very distant and impersonal, responding to him as "the God on high," "the Lord," this distant exalted one. Even the word they use for "bow" is a word of servile obeisance. Their tone reflects the attitude: "We are so far from him, what could he want from us?"

Second, as we have seen clearly, God has been actively involved with Israel because of his unconditional love for them. It came through in the Deuteronomy 7 passage we read above. His saving activity is an expression of his character, his commitment to them. Israel, in contrast, is very manipulative in her approach to God. The language of the phrases, "With what shall I come?" "Shall I come with whole burnt offerings before him?" is not the language used to worship God in the Old Testament. It is the language of manipulation, the language of someone approaching another person with gifts in order to get what they want from that person. It is the language that was used in Genesis 32 to describe Jacob returning to his brother Esau whom he had double-crossed years before. Jacob sent flock after flock of livestock ahead of him—donkeys, sheep, and all different kinds of gifts—to "grease the skids" for his return home. The gift-giving implied that Esau had the problem. Esau was the one who held grudges, and hopefully Jacob's generosity would distract him from the original betrayal, perhaps buy him off.

In the third area of dissonance, Israel reveals her own heart in assuming that God is demanding, which is projection of the worst kind. *They* are the demanding ones, yet they project their problem on God. The question is about excessive giving: "Do you want *whole* burnt offerings? Do you want the *very best* yearling calf in my herd?" It suggests that God's primary interest is in the size and cost of the gifts. The next picture of a river literally evokes images of raging torrents of olive oil. Is that what God wants? And the final image is really ugly: Does God want newborn babies? The first-born? Does he want child sacrifice?

Their response reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of how God wants to have relationships restored to him that

have been broken by sin, and how he wants to maintain an ongoing love relationship with his people. The sacrificial system in the Old Testament was not a means of bribing God. Sacrifice was an outward sign of something going on inside—a broken spirit, a contrite heart. Bruce Waltke says this about the worshipper who asks these kinds of questions:

Outwardly, the worshipper appears spiritual as he bows before the Most High with gift in hand. But his insulting questions betray a desperately wicked heart. Blinded to God's goodness and character, he reasons with his own depraved frame of reference. He need not change, God must change. He compounds his sin of refusing to repent by suggesting that God, like man, can be bought. His willingness to raise the price does not reflect his generosity but veils a complaint that God demands too much. The reverse side of his bargain is that he hopes to buy God off as cheaply as possible. (1)

What effrontery to such a mighty and gracious God! Micah now responds on God's behalf in verse 8. This is the heart of the passage. Notice that Micah doesn't answer the question about what sacrifices a person ought to bring to the temple. Rather, the answer is focused on the questioner himself, on his quality of life. God is more interested in the person than in any gift a person might bring him. What God cares about is character. What God really wants is ethical purity in how we live our lives.

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

Micah essentially says that there is nothing new here. God has already told you what his requirements are. That term "good" was always used by the Old Testament prophets to sum up the requirements of the law, which were good and intended for our good. Israel heard God's expectation of covenant-keeping over and over. Again, we heard it in Deuteronomy 7, and a bit later at the same gathering, at the second giving of the law, in Deuteronomy 10, Moses adds this:

And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? (Deuteronomy 10:12, 13 - NIV)

As 20th-century followers of Jesus Christ, we are folded into this set of expectations. Jesus quoted this verse from Micah in challenging the empty religion of his own day. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus accused the Pharisees of majoring in the minors of external religious practice. He told them they had "neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness." Luke's account, which is slightly different, quotes Jesus as saying, "You disregard justice and the love of God" (Luke 11:42).

So what does God require of us if we are going to consider ourselves his redeemed people? Micah's list of core requirements focuses on three things—two of them sum up our relationships to people around us, and the third one sums up our relationship to the Lord.

First, God requires us to do justice, or act justly. Justice describes right relationships with other people based on how God views them, treating others in a way that honors and glorifies God. It implies attitudes and behaviors that reflect God's commitment to justice. He has made those clear in the law that Israel already has. He is concerned about the protection of foreigners and slaves, of orphans and widows, anyone who is vulnerable and can be easily taken advantage of or wronged. Micah has already attacked injustice in the first three chapters of this book. He denounced violent acts of physical abuse, confiscation of other people's land and possessions, treating people inhumanely, and cheating other people for financial benefit.

The call here is to "do justice," not just be supportive of justice accomplished by other people. We ourselves are to be people that live out justice. It requires pro-activity on our part. We are called to challenge those in authority who are using their position to take advantage of people who are weak and vulnerable. We are to defend and serve the helpless victims who live in our communities: battered women, children of poverty, immigrants among us, even

illegal aliens. Justice means concern for the unborn and for those working in our communities who live below the poverty line.

Many people from our body are involved in ministries which do exactly that: New Creation House in East Palo Alto, serving mostly teen-aged single mothers. There is also Bread of Life, Green Pastures, Urban Ministries, Community Pregnancy Centers, and City Team. All of these ministries do justice in serving people who are weak and vulnerable because of misfortune, whether due to their own fault or someone else's. The servants in those ministries act justly, not with any reluctance, but out of hearts that are grateful, gracious, and loving. They are examples of living out the first requirement, to do justice.

The second requirement is to love kindness or, as some translations may say, loyalty. The New International Version ("NIV") says to "love mercy." The Hebrew word is *hesed*, which means "loyal love," the greatest attribute of God in the Old Testament. It defines his steadfast covenantal love. Our call is to love people in the same way that God loves us: unconditionally, mercifully, passionately, consistently, kindly, and with loyalty. God is attentive, and faithfully loyal to his covenant relationships. Again, as followers of Jesus Christ, our relationships are to be marked by this kind of covenant loyalty. Husbands and wives, I appeal to you to cultivate this spiritual quality of loyalty in your marriage. You will be a wonderful picture of God's love. We live in a society that doesn't know much about loyalty in love relationships. Divorces outnumber marriages two-to-one. We have the privilege of living loyally, of cultivating loyalty in our marriage relationship.

Parents, let me challenge you to cultivate loyalty with your children. Spend time with them. Invest in them. Then you will be wonderfully counter-culture in not placing your career ahead of your family.

Children, likewise let me challenge you to cultivate loyalty with your parents. We live in a day and age where it's not cool to be loyal to your parents, where the norm is to put your parents down, and dishonor them. But the call of Micah is to go against that flow and show lovingkindness to your parents.

Finally, for those in the workplace, we are called to actively cultivate *hesed* in our business relationships in a culture where commitments are taken lightly and contracts are made to be broken. The call is for us is to fulfill our obligations, to make our word our bond. That is lovingkindness.

The final requirement is to walk humbly with God, to "walk circumspectly." The Hebrew root of the word describes a lifestyle that is not proud, not self-willed, and not arrogant. We are called to walk in submission to God and to his heart, his will, and his ways. We are to live attentively and carefully. We are to follow God's will prudently. The contrast, I think, would be to live carelessly, presumptuously doing things our own way instead of being attentive to God's will. When I live out of presumption, carelessly trusting my own judgment, my impulsiveness can be a very hurtful thing in relationships. I can run ahead of God. and end up being harmfully inconsiderate of the needs of other people, though I am called to be the opposite. Learning to walk humbly with God frees me to do justice and cultivate loyal relationships with the people around me.

It is so important for us to understand that we can't fulfill any of these requirements in verse 8 apart from a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. We can't do justice unless we have been justified through faith and unless we are right with God ourselves. David writes in Psalm 32,

How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit! (Psalm 32:1, 2)

How can we cultivate loyal love in our relationships if we have not personally experienced God's merciful love for us and been drawn into a love relationship with him? The apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 2:4, 5: "But God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)." If we want to walk humbly with God, we must be willing to live submissively before him, confessing presumption, accepting the example of Jesus himself. Jesus said,

Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:26-28)

The parable from Luke 18 about the tax gatherer and the Pharisee illustrates the themes that come out of Micah 6:8. The tax gatherer knew he was justified by faith, not by doing good deeds like the Pharisee claimed that he had done. Since the tax gatherer depended on God's merciful, loyal love to save him, he was willing to humble himself before the Lord. In contrast, the Pharisee "informed" God (and everyone else who happened to be listening to him pray in the temple) how good he was and therefore how much he deserved a break from God and God's blessing. I think Micah hoped that the nation of Judah would end up like the tax-gatherer in Jesus' story, repentant and broken before the Lord. But the last half of chapter 6 reveals that they were still more like the self-satisfied Pharisee, proud of themselves for what they had done.

#### God's verdict

Since there has been no justice for others, no deep desire to cultivate loving loyalty in relationships, no concern for walking with God in humility, God pronounces the verdict of his covenant lawsuit against his people. In verses 9-12, God summarizes his accusations against them concerning covenant disloyalty. These things we've heard before he summarizes with the word wickedness, expressed in deceit, in violence, injustice.

The voice of the LORD will call to the city—And it is sound wisdom to fear Thy name [That's his way of saying, "when God speaks you had better listen."]:
"Hear, O tribe. Who has appointed its time?" [It is time now to settle accounts.]
"Is there yet a man in the wicked house,
Along with treasures of wickedness,
And a short measure that is cursed?"
[God asks...] "Can I justify wicked scales
And a bag of deceptive weights?
For the rich men of the city are full of violence,
Her residents speak lies,
And their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.

## **Summary of accusations**

As we have already seen, Micah has preached against these sins of economic exploitation, deception in the court system, and so on. What makes this accusation even more serious is the word "yet" or "still" in verse 10. "Is there *still* the person of wickedness?" Micah asks. Even though he has been preaching for years, they are still unrepentant. They are still justifying their sin against God. Clearly here, God is accusing the merchants in the marketplace of cheating people. They are using dishonest weights and measures. So the answer to God's questions in verse 11 is obviously "No," God cannot look the other way. He cannot declare the merchants innocent. The wealthy in verse 12 are disloyal to God's covenant. They practice lawlessness, violence, oppression, lying to get their way, browbeating people who challenge their business practices, and misrepresent the products they sell. The fact that these powerfully wealthy men are described as "full of violence" means their sin is deep. It runs to the core of their being. The result is horribly damaging to others, especially the poor.

Because of Israel's infidelity, this present love relationship with God is unbearable to him. The only possible verdict in the lawsuit is "guilty as charged." By announcing this terrible sentence, Micah once again hopes to convince Judah of the seriousness of their sin. God's people have to realize that he cannot tolerate this behavior forever. God does not enjoy punishing his people any more than any of us as parents enjoy punishing our children. God has, however, ordained the inexorable principle that people do reap what they sow.

#### God's sentence

So Micah declares God's sentence of punishment in verses 13-16. At first he describes a judgment that is already going on in Judah; they are just not aware of it. This judgment is slow and subtle, but very thorough. Verses 13-15 show the preliminary effects of this judgment.

So also I will make you sick, striking you down,
Desolating you because of your sins.
You will eat, but you will not be satisfied,
And your vileness will be in your midst.
You will try to remove for safekeeping,
But you will not preserve anything,
And what you do preserve I will give to the sword.
You will sow but you will not reap.
You will tread the olive but will not anoint yourself with oil;
And the grapes, but you will not drink wine. (Micah 6:13-15)

Earlier, in his reminder of his faithfulness through history, we saw that God was able to reverse the curses against Israel and turn them into blessing. But here it is going to be the opposite: He is going to take the normal blessings of how things work in the natural world, the world of sowing and reaping, and switch it around so that his blessing becomes a curse—the curse of futility. They will end up bitterly frustrated with life. "Futility" means having things but not being satisfied with them or not enjoying all the things that you have accumulated. For example, eating gourmet foods will bring no satisfaction, and planting will not be followed by harvest. Crushing grapes won't result in enjoying fine wine. Saving and investing your money won't result in healthy returns. All your creative potential and purpose will be denied. No matter how hard you try, God is saying, "you can't preserve life! No matter how hard you work, your job will provide no deep satisfaction!"

In verse 13 Micah called it "sin sickness." Some today call it "destination sickness." You see it in people who, having obtained it all, ask, "Is this all there is? Is this what I worked so hard for?" People who don't live in proper relationship to God will never be satisfied relationally, materially, physically, or vocationally. They end up creating hell on earth in their own circle of existence, the hell of futility, vanity, chasing after wind.

Finally, in the last verse of the chapter, Micah describes the judgment that is yet to come. It will come suddenly and it will be destructive when the people are taken away into captivity.

The statues of Omri
And all the works of the house of Ahab are observed;
And in their devices you walk.
Therefore, I will give you up for destruction
And your inhabitants for derision,
And you will bear the reproach of My people. (Micah 6:13)

They will still have his name, but they will live lives of shame, publicly exposed under God's judgment. In order to catch their attention and show them how serious their problems are, he compares Judah, the southern kingdom, to Israel, the northern kingdom. The two kings he names, Omri and Ahab, were the two most wicked, violent kings in the nation's history. And Micah says to the people of Judah, "that's what you're like."

They would have recoiled from that. It would be like telling us today that in our attitudes and behavior as Christians we are guilty of the same attitudes and behavior of Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. We would certainly recoil from that! But as he has warned them before, even though he loves them, God will give them over. He will allow their ruin, their annihilation by their enemies, and all the nations around them will shame them publicly. And sadly enough, the people Micah preached to, for probably 30 years, did not listen. They refused to recognize the depth of their sin and their need for forgiveness.

But we don't have to end up like that. We can hear. We can listen. None of us needs to live with that kind of determined stubbornness. If we are willing, we can see the depth of our sin and our own sinful stubbornness.

Too often we angrily accuse God of unfaithfulness toward us. There are times when we want to bargain with God

about his requirements of us. We tend to trust external religious activity too much. We stay busy doing religious things rather than sustaining pro-active justice, loyal relationships, and a submissive walk with God, trying to hear what he wants for us. We'd rather do it our own way than listen to him.

If we are honest, we know we are prone to wander from resting in the Lord, into driven-ness, restless striving, trusting our own resources, eating the bread of anxious toil, tasting futility.

If we are honest, we have to recognize that we are no better than the people of Judah. We know we have the sinful potential to engage in violent crimes of oppression, worthy of hell.

The good news is that the only kind of people God can save are people who know they are lost. The only kind of people God forgives are people who know they are guilty. If we see ourselves as God sees us, then we can, by faith, become what he wants us to become. True saving faith comes from a heart that has been broken in repentance and realizes that only God can atone for sin; we can't atone for our own sins. Only God can conform us to his image. Listen again to the gospel, the good news, as it comes to us from the apostle Paul in Ephesians 2:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, in order that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:4-10)

What are those good works? Micah has eloquently told us:

He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you But to do justice, to love kindness, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

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#### NOTES:

(1) Bruce K. Waltke, *The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries – Micah*. © 1988, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL. Pp. 194-195.

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