

Knowing and Doing God's Will: Do Justice

Matthew 23:23-26 Micah 6:1-8

Our series: knowing and doing God's will. Last week we talked about the distinction between God's *revealed* will, and God's *hidden* or *mysterious* will...

The rest of this series will be about God's *revealed* will, taken from one verse in the prophet Micah, which has 3 admonitions. I'll read the entire context of that passage in a moment. But first...

A brief bit of important background: the prophet Micah is a contemporary of fellow Old Testament prophets Isaiah, Hosea and Amos in the 8th century BC. Isaiah was a priest in Jerusalem, part of the professional class; Amos was a farmer from rural Judea; Hosea and Micah were likely also working-class folks, merchants or farmers as well, whom God called to speak a word of truth to the people of Israel. And that's what the prophets were: truth-tellers. A big misconception is that prophets have a crystal ball and what they mainly do is predict the future. That is **not** what they did. Prophets were not *foretellers*, but *forth*-tellers—they told forth the truth on God's behalf. And it's significant that Israel had become so complacent in the 8th century that it took **four prophets** to get through to them! That's how stubborn they had become.

In a nutshell, the nation of Israel was living in a time of great national prosperity, following the reign of their greatest king, David, a century and a half earlier. This prosperity had created a kind of complacency in their religion. Or, more accurately, complacency in their *spirituality*. They were still quite *religious*, in the sense that they went to temple and synagogue, observed the festivals and other rituals and sacrifices and so forth. But those festivals and rituals had become rote and meaningless as the people became selfish and self-indulgent, greedy, and lost their concern for the common good, especially for those who were poor.

They manipulated and flat out violated laws and business practices so that the rich became richer, and the poor became poorer. Hence, God's stern words to them, first through the prophets, then through Jesus (as we heard!), who stands in the tradition of the prophets by speaking words of truth to people. With this in mind, let's hear from the prophet Micah...

Micah 6:1-8

6Hear what the LORD says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. ²Hear, 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. ³"O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! ⁴For 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. ⁵O 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.”

Summary: God is saying, remember how I have saved you, from this... and from this... and this... The prophets often do that—call people to remember where they’ve been, and what God has done for them. It’s why Jesus, in instituting the Lord’s Supper, said, “Do this and *remember* me.” In other words, remember your salvation; remember what I have done for you. And that’s what God, through Micah, has done here.

Now Micah gives the people some words to say in response; he gives them a liturgy:

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? ⁷Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (i.o.w., with more religious offerings? The answer is, of course, no)

⁸He 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?

This is the word of the Lord.

And the Lord says... Do Justice! This phrase is an active imperative. It does not say “pray for justice” or “hope for justice.” It doesn’t say “let there be justice.” Those are all good—to pray, hope, and desire justice.

Yet, Micah, and all the prophets, and Jesus in his own way, say *do* justice.

Actively work so goodness may prevail in the world, for *everyone*. Which, by the

way, requires following all three admonitions: This is the challenge of the text, to hold together “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.” By the time we get to the end, we’ll see how these are intertwined, and are practiced together.

Let’s dig into what justice is, what the Bible means by justice, and what it all means for our congregation and each of us in our day-to-day living.

Generally speaking, justice can mean a few different things.

One, justice means administering the **law**. A country’s Department of Justice oversees the legal system. Judges are called “Justices.” When someone is convicted of a crime, we might say “Justice has been done” through a court of law.

Within the sphere of law, we can also talk about justice as **fairness**. In our country, the symbol for justice is the Roman goddess Justitia (called Lady Justice), who is blindfolded so as not to be influenced by what or who she sees. She holds scales in her hands to represent that justice weighs the evidence and decides on the merits, in order to be reasonably *fair* to everyone. And *fairness*, of course, applies to our day to day lives as we try to treat everyone impartially.

Justice is more than good laws, though. Because we can have an excellent legal system, yet people can still go hungry or without medical care. So, there is a

type of justice called ***distributive*** justice, which requires that the basic needs of life should be met. Where everyone has access to necessities like food, housing, and medical care. This type of social and economic justice affirms the common good. That we have responsibilities to one another. In Luke's gospel, Jesus quotes from Isaiah 61 to describe his coming ministry, saying, "I have come to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the captive, sight for the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord's jubilee," which meant the forgiveness of debts once in every generation. Hearing this, and other similar teachings of Jesus, one would rightly come to the conclusion that Jesus cares about things like health care, and food stamps as policies leading to *distributive* justice.

Another form of justice seldom talked about, but central to the Scripture's teaching, is ***restorative*** justice. This is the practice of trying to mend and heal what has been broken by injustice. For example, our Mennonite sisters and brothers have been at the forefront of encouraging mediation between people who commit crimes and their victims. The perpetrator works at restitution of some kind, and forgiveness and reconciliation work is done which may help both parties heal and move on. *Restorative* justice affirms that punishment alone is not complete justice, and sometimes actually makes things worse instead of better.

I recently heard about a large congregation where the church administrator was going to trial on 50 felony counts of embezzlement over the course of many years. As you can imagine, people felt hurt, betrayed, and trust was broken. The church turned in evidence of that person's crime, but many from the congregation also wrote to the judge and asked for leniency in sentencing and a way forward to help everyone heal. They wanted this person to make financial restitution but not go to prison. So, the judge made a plea bargain, and part of the deal, in addition to restitution, was a public apology to the church in court, and a mediated process of reconciliation so that everyone could process their hurt and their feelings in order to heal and move forward. That's an example of *restorative justice*. And I wish our country could figure out how to do this!

If you want to learn more about restorative justice, I highly recommend *Until We Reckon*, by Danielle Sered. Danielle Sered founded and leads an organization called Common Justice, which provides programs for perpetrators, and victim service programs, as an alternative to just funneling people into the prison pipeline, which rarely helps rehabilitate those who commit crimes, and almost always leaves victims without an opportunity to truly heal and move forward. As a teaser, in the beginning of the book she says that if incarceration (punitive justice) ensured safety in our communities, we would be the safest

nation in all of human history. Because the U.S. has a little over 4% of the world's population, but 25% of the world's incarcerated people. Yet, we still struggle with crime, violence, and addiction. Incarceration isn't working, and we need a solution that is *restorative* for everyone. I'd love it if a group of y'all read this book together! Restorative justice is more complex and nuanced, and it takes work to achieve. But it's a form of justice—a Biblical form of justice—that we need in order to heal our communities.

So... justice can mean what is legal, fair, distributive, or restorative. You know how much I love word studies, so here is the word Micah uses: mishpat. This Hebrew word for justice, mishpat, occurs over 200 times in the Old Testament and is sometimes translated as the legal ordinances people are required to follow. The Ten Commandments, for example, are mishpat. But the word can also refer to the quality of a person's character. The sincere and humble person who treats others impartially is mishpat. God is described as mishpat ("God is just and upright"). I was surprised to find that the biblical book which uses this word for justice most frequently is the Psalms. For example, Psalm 82:3 reads, "Give justice (mishpat) to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute."

Mishpat can also mean a justly ordered society. When *Micah and the prophets* use mishpat, they usually mean this—a justly ordered society. They hold the king, the leaders of the community, and the wealthy accountable to work for a justly-ordered society.

Old Testament scholar and professor Walter Brueggeman says that when God looks at a nation, it is measured not by the size of its buildings, its gross national product, or the power of its military, *but by what life is like for the most vulnerable people*. This is God’s litmus test for a society: not its wealth or success, but how it treats its most vulnerable people. If a nation/society treats its people with fairness, reasonable distribution, and restorative action, that society has mishpat. This is what the Bible means when it says to defend the widow and the orphan, and give justice to the weak and maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. They are the most socially vulnerable.

It is not an exaggeration nor is it a mis-reading of Scripture to say that God has a special place in his heart for the poor, the marginalized, the stranger, and the lowly. The laws of the Old Testament make that clear, the prophets make that *abundantly* clear, and Jesus makes it clear from the beginning of his ministry, when he quotes Isaiah 61 and claims those words as his mission, and when he gives the beatitudes (“blessed are the poor... blessed are the meek”, and so on).

And, in Paul's letters, the admonition to the early church to help the poor and to be generous, and to be people of reconciliation, as God's ambassadors on earth, also makes it abundantly clear. God has a special place in his heart for the poor and the lowly of society. And the expectation is that God's people would reflect God's heart of care and *mishpat*.

It must be noted: in all of the prophets' salty warnings to the people, and in Jesus' salty teachings, spoken within the context of warning about things like greed and self-righteousness, in order to do what is right and just and fair, those salty speeches are 99% of the time spoken to *God's people*, the people of faith. Rarely are those words spoken to "secular" people, out there.

If we take Jesus as our example of fulfilling the law and the prophets, as he said he came to do—(early in Matthew's gospel he said, "I have not come to *abolish* the law and the prophets, but to *fulfill* them")—if we take Jesus as our example, we notice that his words and actions toward "outsiders," or non-religious people, were consistently filled with grace, mercy, and justice. Largely because he spent most of his time with the poor, lowly, and those on society's margins. His words and actions toward what we might call "insiders," or religious people, were also filled with grace, mercy, and justice, *until...* he saw bad religion oppressing vulnerable people. Which was the case with the Pharisees, hence his

fierce condemnation of them in the reading you heard from Matt.23—which was only one small part of the much longer set of woes. As one of our high school students said years ago after hearing someone read that entire passage, “Jesus opened up a can of whoop-ass on those guys!”

Jesus reflects God’s heart for the poor in his entire ministry, but it comes in a startling way in one of his parables when he says, “I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was naked, and you clothed me. I was in prison and you visited me... I was a stranger and you welcomed me...” And at the end of that parable he says, “In as much as you’ve done this to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you’ve done it unto me.” When we care for the poor, hurting, lonely, and those in need, he says, we are caring for Jesus himself. Wow.

God’s heart goes out to the poor and the hurting. God’s heart becomes fierce in their defense. Which means, the flip side of that coin, that God’s heart also becomes fierce when people who say they are following God’s ways ignore the plight of the poor and the hurting, or, *actually make things worse for them*.

This was the prophets’ fiercest criticism: that the people of Israel not just ignored the poor, but exploited them for selfish gain.

This makes me think of what Bill Gates said last week when he was asked what he thought about fellow billionaire Elon Musk and he said, “the picture of

the world's richest man killing the world's poorest children isn't a pretty one." As funding to critical services for poor children has been cut while Musk receives multi-million-dollar contracts for his businesses. I don't consider Bill Gates a prophet, but that's a prophet-like statement. What a contrast in billionaires. One who intends to give away his 200 billion over the next 20 years to help people, the other who is trying to make more billions off of all of us in whatever way he can. Which one, would you say, is mishpat? And btw, props to Melinda Gates as well, who is doing incredible things around the world to alleviate poverty, and support women and vulnerable people.

One of our kids said: why do billionaires exist, anyway? There shouldn't be such a thing as billionaires. Who needs that much money? She has a point.

As I've said over the years, I am grateful and proud to be part of a congregation that cares for the poor, the needy, the hurting, the lonely, and for those seeking God no matter where they are on their journey. We're all on a journey! Which, again, is why we need each other—for support and encouragement, and, to team up so, together, we can continue to seek God's guidance and strength to do our part to help those in our community who need help.

And I want to affirm that each of us will “do justice” in our day-to-day lives a way that fits with our time, our temperament, our skills and our calling. Some of us give financially. Some of us volunteer at places like a food bank (like Matt!). Some of us write letters or make phone calls to elected officials, some of us attend town hall meetings and speak up. Some of us support their local elementary school that has a diverse population of kids. Sometimes this work will be joyful and feel fulfilling. Sometimes it will be hard and feel divisive, even if it is blessed work that accomplishes God’s revealed will.

Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of El Salvador, once said, “When I fed the hungry, they called me a saint. When I asked *why* they are hungry, they called me a socialist.” Jesus did not come to create a community of followers that never made any waves over social injustice. And when Micah said do justice, he meant the fullest possible expression of *mishpat*, through doing what is right, being generous, and taking responsibility for a justly-ordered society.

But here is the essential thing Micah also says. While doing justice, we also love kindness and walk humbly with God. This is where God’s people are called to be different than just a social activist.

If there is a kindness in God’s justice, then there should be a kindness in ours too. When we work for justice, we must also have a humility to realize that

no action or policy is perfect, no party is the exclusive right hand of God, and we each often have a log in our own eye, to use Jesus' illustration, that can blind us to injustice. So we need to look at ourselves from time to time and what may block our willingness, or our ability, to do God's will by doing justice. We'll talk about kindness and humility over the next two weeks.

As I end this message, I feel like I have barely scratched the surface of possibility. I hope it is a conversation starter that helps us reflect on our work and our mission in the world as a church, that all we do may embody justice, kindness and a humble walk with God.

One of our themes for our worship service has been light—walking in the light. The light of God's love, and the light of justice. Let's sing to that now.

Come, Live in the Light