

## **Just Courage: 2. The Path to Courage**

**Micah 6:6-8**

**September 15, 2019**

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Let me begin with a football story. In 1996, Tony Dungy left the Minnesota Vikings after four years as defensive coordinator, and he became the head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He left the first ranked defense in the NFL to coach a team that had just completed 13 straight losing seasons. People told him not to take the job. They said there was no way to win. Dungy went anyway. When he arrived at Tampa Bay, he asked, "Why aren't you winning football games?" He interviewed everybody, and they gave him four answers for the team's dismal record. Some said it was because the stadium was old and the facilities were poor. Others blamed it on low ticket sales, which meant the team couldn't afford to hire the players that they needed to win. Others said we live in Florida and can't win in cold weather, as they never won games when the temperature was less than forty degrees. And then some fans mentioned the so-called "Doug Williams Curse." Supposedly, some voodoo-practicing woman who loved Doug Williams, the former quarterback, had put a curse on the team when he left, and the team could not become a winner again until that curse was lifted.

As Dungy reviewed this list of obstacles, he realized something important: the entire list was outside of his or his players' control. He did not have the budget to recruit a bunch of superstars, and he didn't have the ability to build a snazzy new stadium. They couldn't control the weather across the country, and there was no way to get rid of the voodoo woman, whoever she was. Dungy was facing things that he could not control. It would have been easy to slip into the hopelessness that accompanies helplessness. Instead, he immediately did something that all great leaders do, and there is no way to minimize the power of this one move. He asked one essential question: What can we control?

He looked at the statistics of winning teams and discovered they shared three characteristics. They had lower turnovers, fewer penalties, and high-performing special teams. He said, "we can control that." Turnovers and penalties are "self-inflicted wounds," and special teams can create the big plays that contribute to wins. By focusing on these three things, all three of them totally within his and his players' control, he led the team to a turnaround, and then he carried that thinking on to the Indianapolis Colts, which led them to the championship in Super Bowl XLI .

We all struggle with control. We try to control what we can't control or we don't take charge of what we can. During a tough period in my life when I felt overwhelmed by what was happening around me and ineffective in my personal and professional life, I wrote down four statements and posted them beside my desk. These four statements have helped me through the past 30 years. 1. Life is messy. There is a lot that we cannot control – accept that. 2. God is good. There is a God and that God loves us and God can empower us to get through whatever we face. 3. I have a purpose. For me, it is to serve the needs of people. In other words, I have a purpose, and that purpose means looking outward and focusing on others. 4. Just do it! Don't let the messiness of life and what seems overwhelming be the excuse for not doing. Just do it. Focus on what you can control and don't focus on what you can't.

Last week, I used the image of the path. We come up with all kinds of reasons to stay in the comfort of the Visitor Center and miss out on the true adventure of the path. The path is the adventure, it is living fully and completely as a follower of Jesus – and that takes courage, because followers of Jesus rarely get to choose what their path will be. What we choose is whether to go on the path or not. God is the creator of the path. I don't know enough about

where I am, where I want to go or how to get there to be able to blaze my own path. The summer before last, I was in New Mexico and one morning, I decided to hike up a mountain behind the place where I was staying. And as I started my hike, I looked for a path, because I knew that not only would a path lead me up the mountain but it would be the way back down. Three years earlier, I had been at this same place and decided I didn't need a path. As I was walking, I stepped on a rock that I didn't see and it gave way. I fell and slip to within inches of sliding over the edge of a cliff. I need a path. We all need a path, and the purpose of the path is get to a place that we would never get to on our own. God creates the path. Our job is to walk in it.

In this morning's scripture, the prophet Micah offered that kind of path, and it is still available to us today. Micah was a prophet. A prophet is someone who is given the burden of seeing life the way God wants it to be. It was the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century BC. After 40 years of prosperity, the nation was on the verge of falling apart. During these years of prosperity, the people forgot about God. They drifted away. They got caught up in what they thought was the good life, and they did not see that they were drifting, and they were not at all prepared for what would eventually be the total destruction of an entire nation. Micah has this great burden that God has given him. This is no longer the nation that God had in mind, and Micah rails at the injustices of the leaders and the unjust behavior of the people. Finally, in chapter 6, Micah imagines a giant courtroom where the entire nation is put on trial for their crimes. In the jury box are the mountains that God has made. The very foundation of the earth will determine their guilt or innocence. The prosecuting attorney is none other than God himself. God recounts all that God has done for the people through history, because the people have drifted – they've forgotten God – they are trying to control what they can't control – they've chosen the wrong path. And then, Israel, the defendant replies, "God, what do you want from us?" We worship you, but that must not be enough for you!

**Should I come before [you] with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit of my body for the sin of my spirit?** If our worship is not enough for you, God, then tell us. What do you want from us? What path are we to take? And it's at this point in the trial that Micah speaks up: **God has told you what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.** And that's it. That's the path for those who follow Jesus: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus called out the most religious of his day: **You give to God a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, but you forget about the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness.** It's the path that looks to the suffering in this world, knowing that we have been given a purpose – we are the hands and feet of Jesus – so we do the courageous thing. We do something.

The Methodist movement was born in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, a time of great economic gain for many as the industrial revolution took hold – but at the same time half of the population lived in poverty. If you accumulated debt and you could not pay your debts you and your family were sent to prison – until someone paid your debts. There was no agency, no social service to help. So into the prison came the Methodists. They went where no one else would go. John Wesley spoke so passionately about the cause of the poor and the need for justice that he was forbidden to speak in Church of England. So he went out into the streets and the fields. There were hungry people, so the Methodists showed up with food. There were sick people so the Methodists opened free health clinics. People could not read and could not afford to go to school, so the Methodists started schools. The Methodists offered hope. That's who we are.

Methodists were on fire with the Holy Spirit – and they did something. Where there was injustice, they did something. And the followers of Jesus still do.

Two years ago, a family of four walked into this building – a mom and a dad and two children ages 2 and 4. They had just moved into this neighborhood, recent immigrants from the Middle East. Mom could not speak any English and Dad was only working part-time as a driver because they could not afford child care. If you have not priced child care recently, it is more than \$1000 a month – and they had two children. But you did something that will forever change the trajectory of these four people. Through the Shirley Robinson Scholarship Fund, you provided scholarships so that both children could be enrolled in Bloom full time. Initially, the transition from home to Bloom was so difficult for parents and children that the Dad accompanied his children and stayed here for an hour and a half each morning. He was concerned for the safety of his children and who he could trust. But with coaching and parent education from our staff, he began to trust and discover how to let go so that he could focus on fulltime work. Both children appeared developmentally delayed and had difficulty relating to other adults and other children. Often when a child enters kindergarten and is not functioning at age level, he or she may never catch up. That's the importance of early childhood education. Two years later, mom has learned English, has a driver's license, and is now employed. And Dad is now employed full time. Both children are socially and academically at age level. What may seem like child care, actually changed the trajectory of their lives. You made this possible. It's called justice, mercy, and faithfulness.

What is the path that God has laid out before us? To be a follower of Jesus means, I've got to pay attention to the needs around me, pay attention to the suffering in this world. Let my heart break for those things that break the heart of God. Micah was saying it's not enough to come here, to worship God, to be inspired to be a better person. The path that God offers calls us to do justice. Love mercy. Mercy is getting what you don't deserve. Everybody in this room, there's only one reason we're here, we're all getting what we don't deserve – the love and mercy of God. Walk humbly with God – that means I will give my whole life.

Late one night I wasn't able to sleep, and I got up and turned on the television and I saw this news story [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQVlkZqVpE0>] That takes courage. Just a few of those acts take courage. There is much in this world that we cannot control, but we can choose the path. We can make a difference. We are God's delivery system. All that is needed. God has provided.

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of September 15, 2019**

**Weekly Prayer:** Eternal God, you have set forth the way of life for us in Jesus of Nazareth. You have laid before us a path of justice, mercy, and humility. Give us hearts that break for those things that break your heart so that we can reach out to those who hurt and let them know that you are real and ever-present. Grant us the will to seek your direction in all things. We trust you with our lives. Amen.

### **Monday, September 16**

#### **Scripture: Micah 6:6-8**

With what should I approach the LORD and bow down before God on high? Should I come before him with entirely burned offerings, with year-old calves? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with many torrents of oil? Should I give my oldest child for my crime; the fruit

of my body for the sin of my spirit? He has told you, human one, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: to do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God.

**Observation:** The prophet Micah was responding to a question: What does the Lord require of us? These verses contain one of the most memorable statements in the Old Testament defining a proper relationship with God. Micah was speaking to all of Israel about the kind of obedience God expects from us. Disciples are to act justly because God is just; to love mercy because God is merciful; to walk humbly with God, because God is holy.

**Application:** How have you observed these three character traits of God being played out in your life? Justice and love are only possible if we “walk humbly with your God”. What distracts you or keeps you from a daily focus on walking with God?

**Prayer:** Thank you, O God, for showing me how to live. With all that I must do today and with all that may unexpectedly come my way, keep me focused on justice and love. Help me with what is the most loving response as I walk with you today. Amen.

## **Tuesday, September 17**

### **Scripture: Isaiah 1:16-17**

Wash! Be clean! Remove your ugly deeds from my sight. Put an end to such evil; learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow.

**Observation:** The prophet, Isaiah, conveyed instruction on God’s behalf according to a vision he had regarding Judah and Jerusalem. Isaiah could see that the nation was approaching disaster. One indication was that those at the margins of society were neglected. People were focused mostly on themselves. God has high expectations for his followers’ involvement in eradicating injustices in the world in which they live. How will God show compassion to the oppressed, orphans, and widows? God will send God’s people (i.e. us!).

**Application:** Ask God to show you areas in your life that need to be washed clean by his power so that you will be able to respond to the needs around you with pure hands and spotless heart. Where are the unmet needs (physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual) around you that have your attention?

**Prayer:** Let your Holy Spirit be at work with me to remove whatever is keeping me from your way. Help me to hear your call to action. Empower me to be the neighbor that someone around me will need today. Amen.

## **Wednesday, September 18**

### **Scripture: Matthew 23:23-24; Matthew 23:37-39**

“How terrible it will be for you legal experts and Pharisees! Hypocrites! You give to God a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, but you forget about the more important matters of the Law: justice, peace, and faith. You ought to give a tenth but without forgetting about those more important matters. You blind guides! You filter out an ant but swallow a camel.

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem! You who kill the prophets and stone those who were sent to you. How often I wanted to gather your people together, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. But you didn’t want that. Look, your house is left to you deserted. I tell you, you won’t see me until you say, *Blessings on the one who comes in the Lord’s name.*”

**Observation:** Jesus reserved his harshest words for the most religious who considered themselves the most righteous. They devoted themselves to strictly following the commandments from scripture, and yet they failed to see the dire needs of people around them. They worshipped God by tithing while overlooking “justice, peace, and faith.” Israel had a history of rejecting the warnings of prophet after prophet and stoning the people God sent to warn them. Jesus longed to rescue and bring about God’s kingdom, but now Jesus was being rejected. The blessing Jesus longed to bring to Israel would only be received by those who welcomed him in faith.

**Application:** Are we ready to welcome the true Jesus, the one who denounced evil and then took it upon himself in the final great act of love? Or do we prefer to welcome the “Jesus” who happens to fit the imaginings and agendas that we have worked out for ourselves? In other words, who is in control – God or you?

**Prayer:** Dear God of hope and love, when all else fails, you are still the God of hope and love. I want to be part of what you want for this world. Let your hope and love be seen through the way I live this day. Amen.

#### **Thursday, September 19**

##### **Scripture: Hebrews 13:1-3**

Keep loving each other like family. Don’t neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it. Remember prisoners as if you were in prison with them, and people who are mistreated as if you were in their place.

**Observation:** Doing the work of justice is being obedient to Jesus’ command to love our neighbor in a world of injustice. Doing the work of justice is practicing the command to love God with our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Justice is doing for others what we would want done for us. Justice means loving, and that takes courage.

**Application:** Verse 3 puts the work of justice in the context of love. Can we say that we love our neighbors if we do not draw near and seek justice on their behalf? What keeps you from drawing near? When have you experienced someone drawing near to stand with you? How was that an expression of love?

**Prayer:** Merciful God, you know me so very well. You know the challenges that I face. You know those things within me that become detours and distractions from what you want for me, so I place my life in your hands. Help me to answer your call to move toward those persons and places that need what you can do through me. Amen.

#### **Friday, September 20**

##### **Scripture: Matthew 18:16-18**

But if they won’t listen, take with you one or two others so that *every word may be established by the mouth of two or three witnesses.*<sup>16</sup> But if they still won’t pay attention, report it to the church. If they won’t pay attention even to the church, treat them as you would a Gentile and tax collector.<sup>18</sup> I assure you that whatever you fasten on earth will be fastened in heaven. And whatever you loosen on earth will be loosened in heaven.

**Observation:** Jesus invites his disciples to live in the kingdom and rule of God now. That is the preferred vision of the world – to walk in the way of Jesus, to experience the presence of God, to live daily in a completely different way because we know Jesus.

**Application:** That’s how we become the answer to the prayer, “thy kingdom come.” What does Jesus mean when he says we will never enter the kingdom of God unless we receive it like a child? Could he mean when you come in the weakness and vulnerability of a child? And how would it change our lives if we lived as if this were true?

**Prayer:** Thank you for the gift of children – for in them we see a curiosity and a boldness that draws them into the world. Often our adult experience leaves us seeking an escape from the world and its cries for help. Give us the wisdom that we need to know what to do and the courage to do it. Amen.

**Saturday, September 21**

**Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:8-10**

We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren’t crushed. We are confused, but we aren’t depressed. We are harassed, but we aren’t abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren’t knocked out. We always carry Jesus’ death around in our bodies so that Jesus’ life can also be seen in our bodies.

**Observation:** Paul was an apostle – that is, he was “sent out” into the world with the message of the gospel. He knew suffering and physical hardship as a direct result of his faithfulness. If you want to see resurrection at work, you have to be prepared to see crucifixion at work as well.

**Application:** Responding to the needs of others and crying out for justice will come with hardship. It may feel that you are crushed and defeated, but it may actually mean that you are living out the gospel. When have you considered the risks of reaching out and standing alongside others? Did the risks keep you from acting, or serve as a confirmation that you should act?

**Prayer:** In the quietness of these moments, help me to feel and to hear the beating of my heart and to know that you have made me for a purpose. In the quietness of these moments, help me to sense and to hear the deepest needs of those whose names come to mind. Then lead me to a place where my purpose will intersect the needs. Allow me to see that you are there. Amen.