

**Be Just. Be Kind, Be Humble.: 1. Be Just**

**Micah 6:8; Corinthians 1:18-31**

**October 2, 2022**

**Pastor Tami Luckhardt**

Our staff spent a few days this last week at the Leadership Institute at Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. On behalf of the staff, I want to thank you for being a congregation that invests in our continued education and growth. During the week, we experienced meaningful worship, engaging conversation with other church leaders and heard inspiring keynote leaders share their best practice on leading through change. We are living in times of unprecedented change and so we are grateful for the opportunity to hear what other respected church leaders have to teach us about leading through change.

In 2001, leadership expert Jim Collins wrote the bestselling book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. Collins conducted research on 11 companies that had "made the leap" and chronicled why "good is the enemy of great." Business leaders and even church leaders gobbled up this book. I remember reading it when I was on staff at a different church. Organizations read it to move them toward "greatness." Collins defined "greatness" as "distinctive impact" and "superior performance" shepherded by a "level five leader."

It's no wonder the book was so popular. Americans love greatness. We look for ways to move things from good to great. We tend to adopt that language in the church as well. We often think that the measure of a church's greatness is in how "distinctive" its impact might be and its "superior performance" in all the metrics that business organizations measure: bigger, faster, stronger, richer, and more famous. The idea, then, is that if you're not yet great, you have work to do.

The problem, however, is that greatness isn't easy to sustain. Of the 11 "great" companies that Collins profiled in his wildly popular book, most were not so great just a decade later. One had gone out of business, two were sold and four were just modestly successful, according to Collins' own criteria. It would be easy to scoff in hindsight at Collins' research but most books like this illustrate the principle that past results do not always predict future performance.

But it does raise a question. *Is greatness really the best goal for an organization, a nation, a business, or a church?* The prophet Micah didn't seem to think so. When we turn to the Scriptures, one of the things we realize is that greatness is vastly overrated. In fact, rather than the good being the enemy of the great, biblically speaking, *greatness is actually the enemy of goodness.*

*He has told you, human one, what is good and what the Lord requires from you: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.* Micah 6:8 provides for us not only a picture of what God requires of us, but it also provides for us a roadmap toward building the kingdom of Heaven here on this earth. For the next four weeks our sermons will center on this one passage of scripture that should inform our faith. This one passage of Scripture can also be seen clearly through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. One cannot learn about or follow Jesus and not see the importance of justice, humility, mercy, and love. It was evident throughout his entire life. It should be for us as well. So, in this pre-midterm election season and in our increasingly polarized world, we will be using the Micah 6:8 lens in order that we might discover our commonality. We will challenge one another to find ways to demonstrate love to all those whom

we encounter, our families, our friends, our neighbors and particularly to those with whom we differ. This series will help model what it means to love one another while valuing our differences. Today we begin with what good means and how through seeking to do good, we do justice. When we "do justice" it's a recognition that goodness is defined by what God wills and empowers, and not by what we want or desire.

So let's begin with our scripture. See if any of this sounds familiar. Things were not so great in Micah's day. Micah wrote to the nation of Judah during a time when the nation was under the thumb of the Assyrian Empire. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been swallowed up by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and Jerusalem itself was saved only because its king, Hezekiah, paid off the invaders. The people would have remembered when they were once a great nation and may have wondered how to get that back again. In fact, that's one of the overarching themes of Micah. It recalls Genesis 12, where God promised Abraham that his offspring would become a "great" nation through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.

But greatness is contingent upon consistency over time, and Israel demonstrated that it could not sustain that greatness. The kingdom that had reached its height of greatness during the days of David and Solomon and, at the time of Micah, was now a shadow of its former self, divided and conquered. Micah chronicles how the nation had gone off the rails with oppression of the poor, corruption in its courts, dishonest economic practices, false prophets, greedy priests, loss of order and, most tellingly, a rejection of God's justice and God's commandments. Is this sounding familiar?

When you read the first few verses of Micah, chapter 6, you see it's a review of the past. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. God delivered them from their enemies. Yet, they rejected the very One who saved them. How could they possibly be blessed, let alone be a blessing to the nations? They were no longer great and no longer good, either.

Through the prophet Micah, God delivers judgment on the nation, but, as always with God in the prophetic literature, that judgment is also tempered with hope. God tells the people that they will be restored. But how will it happen? How do they get back on track? Well, it won't be because they achieve greatness in their religious practices. *"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 thousand rivers of oil? Should I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"* These are all ridiculously expensive and outrageous sacrifices -- about as good a religious performance metric as an Israelite could imagine. This was sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins on a grand scale. But was that superior religious performance the thing that God really desired of them then? Is it what God wants from us now?

As we consider how we might apply that to the Messiah Church today, we might ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord? With our beautiful building, our many programs and faith groups, our professionally developed website, or our big-dollar budget? Will God be pleased if we show him that we're successful? Is bigger, better, faster, and stronger the sign of the kind of church God blesses? The kind of nation God blesses? Is greatness what God is after?" Micah says no. "He has told you, O human one, what is good." What does the Lord desire? Goodness, not greatness. It's been God's desire all along, from the very first moments of creation, when God saw everything and called it good.

What does such goodness look like? How do we measure it? Well, first Micah says that goodness begins with doing justice. The Hebrew word *mishpat* refers to God's order for all of life. To "do justice," means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means giving

people their rights, including protection, or care. In other words, means that we order all our lives, including our interactions with others, in accordance with God's will. One way of ordering our interactions with others according to God's will means that when we see something that doesn't seem right, we stand up and speak out, we come alongside others when we see an injustice in this world. We put people first.

In the summer of 2020, after the killing of George Floyd, polls estimated that upwards of 26 million people in the United States participated in the demonstrations against racial injustice, making the protests the largest in U.S. history. Will these protests have a lasting impact on racial justice? Time will tell. What we do know is that there are many ways to stand up for justice and a number of movements have actually changed history. For example:

Martin Luther's 95 Theses instigated the Protestant Reformation

The protests against the Stamp Act of 1765 led to the creation of the United States

Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of a segregated bus in 1955 Alabama ignited the civil rights' movement.

Marches, rallies, vigils and protests. They can certainly have an impact. But the cross is God's protest movement and it changed the world forever. And so insisting that the world become more like the Kingdom of God, we take our lead from Jesus.

It was Jesus who stood alone in front of an angry mob who was about to stone a woman to death and saved her life.

Jesus empathized and advocated for the oppressed, hurt, abused, downtrodden, abandoned, alienated and victimized.

Jesus was accused by the "experts" of being disruptive and evil.

Jesus was mocked, ridiculed, abused, intimidated and arrested. Eventually, he was arrested and put on trial, and then he was publicly humiliated, mocked and severely tortured.

All because Jesus put people first.

But it was in this context where his greatest demonstration of justice happened: *dying on the cross*, where God incarnate proved to the world that love overcomes evil, grace overcomes revenge, mercy overcomes cruelty, generosity overcomes selfishness, and hope overcomes fear.

And when we live a cross-shaped life, that is reaching out vertically in our love of God and horizontally in our love for one another, we join this justice movement. We love as Jesus did, reaching out with compassion to the poor, the sick and the strangers in our midst. Sacrifice as Jesus did, giving of our time, talents and treasures in support of God's mission in the world. We serve others as Jesus did, remembering that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many".

The message about the cross is a kind of foolishness to those who are perishing, says the apostle, Paul. "But to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18). In the upside-down world of God's protest movement, "God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (v. 25). Christians who have faith in a crucified and risen Lord know that there is nothing wiser than the teachings of Jesus, and nothing stronger than the Lord who sacrificed himself for us.

While we may live in the golden age of protest, no modern rally can achieve what God accomplished through the cross. *It is because of God that you are in Christ Jesus. He became wisdom from God for us. This means that he made us righteous and holy and delivered us.*

Righteous, holy, and delivered. All of these gifts are connected to Jesus, and are

the results of God's mighty justice movement. They are at the center of a cross-shaped life, qualities that can change the world for the better.

Two years ago, Ty Chapman, from Minneapolis, felt he had to do something more than protest after George Floyd's murder. Like many, he felt a personal call to action. Chapman, who had spent most of his artistic career as a puppeteer, had already begun dabbling with writing children's books. Now he faced a project that felt immediate. "I thought a lot about the historical events that I had gone through in my youth, and the first thing I thought about was 9/11," Chapman said. "I was five when 9/11 took place and I had no real context for what was happening. I just wanted to make sure that the uprising wasn't that for the kids of today."

He began the process of writing a book titled, *Sarah Rising*, that was released earlier this year. It's story of a young Black girl who attends her very first social justice protest with her father. In the book, the young girl, at first scared of the protest, learns the importance of "standing up for what's right." Chapman's drive was to provide families and educators with a tool help kids understand racial injustice. Chapman says he hopes a lot of Black families will read this book but he also hopes that a lot of families that aren't Black will read this book and are able to talk about this issue, because these are conversations that are already happening in Black households. He's hopeful that this can open up conversations across different communities.

Goodness is something that is all of God, whereas 'greatness' is what we humans attempt." When we "do justice" it's a recognition that goodness is defined by what God wills and empowers, and not by what we want or desire. Granted, it's tempting to go after greatness. Greatness gets your name on the cover of the magazine. It gets you the award, the gold watch, the Superbowl ring, the recognition we believe we so richly deserve. But God doesn't require greatness -- only goodness. Goodness is much more sustainable, but it takes a long view to see that. So keep at it because when we focus on doing God's will, being faithful to God's covenant and being attentive to God's leading, we have done all that we were meant to do -- regardless of whether the results impress anyone else.

So this week, ask yourself, how can I be alert for opportunities in everyday activities like work, school, or when I out and about to make choices to do goodness? To what extent are you willing to act consistently for justice?

## **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of October 2, 2022**

### **Weekly Prayer**

Loving God, you are the one who calls us into community with each other to love and work, to support and heal. You call us into community with all people; to bring justice, kindness and humility in all that we do. Fill my heart, fill my eyes, fill my ears with Your love, that I might share Your love with others. Amen.

### **Monday, October 3**

#### **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 spoke to the kingdom of Judah's urge to keep religious ritual and "conspicuous consumption" side-by-side. On God's behalf, he urged a different agenda: "Do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with your God." At Messiah Church, we serve the same God as Micah did and agree that pious rituals matter less than simply treating people justly.

### **Application**

In what ways do your culture and community fall short of doing justice, embracing faithful love, and walking humbly with God? Micah's delineation of God's requirements includes no negative statements about what is forbidden to the Israelites. It presents a positive case of what God thinks is best for humankind. How can you actively move yourself, your family, your workplace, and your community toward God's best for humankind?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, my goal is to walk humbly with you. Lead and guide me into the newness of life that you died and rose again to offer me. Amen.

### **Tuesday, October 4**

#### **Scriptures: Isaiah 58:2-10, James 2:8, 14-17**

They seek me day after day,  
desiring knowledge of my ways  
like a nation that acted righteously,  
that didn't abandon their God.  
They ask me for righteous judgments,  
wanting to be close to God.  
"Why do we fast and you don't see;  
why afflict ourselves and you don't notice?"  
Yet on your fast day you do whatever you want,  
and oppress all your workers.  
You quarrel and brawl, and then you fast;  
you hit each other violently with your fists.  
You shouldn't fast as you are doing today  
if you want to make your voice heard on high.  
Is this the kind of fast I choose,  
a day of self-affliction,  
of bending one's head like a reed  
and of lying down in mourning clothing and ashes?  
Is this what you call a fast,  
a day acceptable to the LORD?  
Isn't this the fast I choose:  
releasing wicked restraints, untying the ropes of a yoke,  
setting free the mistreated,

and breaking every yoke?  
Isn't it sharing your bread with the hungry  
and bringing the homeless poor into your house,  
covering the naked when you see them,  
and not hiding from your own family?  
Then your light will break out like the dawn,  
and you will be healed quickly.  
Your own righteousness will walk before you,  
and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.  
Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and God will say, "I'm here."  
If you remove the yoke from among you,  
the finger-pointing, the wicked speech;  
if you open your heart to the hungry,  
and provide abundantly for those who are afflicted,  
your light will shine in the darkness,  
and your gloom will be like the noon.

You do well when you really fulfill the royal law found in scripture, *Love your neighbor as yourself.*

My brothers and sisters, what good is it if people say they have faith but do nothing to show it? Claiming to have faith can't save anyone, can it? Imagine a brother or sister who is naked and never has enough food to eat. What if one of you said, "Go in peace! Stay warm! Have a nice meal!"? What good is it if you don't actually give them what their body needs? In the same way, faith is dead when it doesn't result in faithful activity.

### **Observation**

Isaiah 58 likely spoke to the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. Too many of them saw the return as a time to resume "business as usual," and wondered why God didn't honor their feasts and fasts. Like Amos and Micah 150 years earlier, the prophet said that instead of showy, external fasts, they needed to "fast" from oppressing others. Jesus' brother James saw that some early Christians had the same spiritual problem. A "faith" unwilling to actively help struggling people, he wrote, is no faith at all.

### **Application**

James wasn't suggesting a good "balance" between faith and works, as though we need a 50/50 mix of the two. We need 100% of both—100% merciful actions growing out of 100% faith in God's gracious acceptance of us, for which we show gratitude. What are some of the faithful actions in loving your neighbor(s) you have seen grow in your life as you respond to God's grace?

### **Prayer**

O God, I want to live a life that honors and pleases you. Help me to offer you my heart, my inner being, before I offer you anything else. Guide me today and each day. Amen.

### **Wednesday, October 5**

#### **Scripture: 2 Corinthians 8:9-15**

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for your sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty. I'm giving you my opinion about this.

It's to your advantage to do this, since you not only started to do it last year but you wanted to do it too. Now finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, given what you can afford. A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. As it is written, *The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little.*

### **Observation**

Christ followers didn't only bridge ethnic or gender divides. In a world with wide gaps between the privileged wealthy and the abused poor, they also reached across economic divides. Paul took up a collection from areas where people were prospering to help Christians in Jerusalem suffering from poverty. He saw Christ's ideal for God's people as the opposite of "class warfare." Christ's example called for deep-seated mutual concern and burden-sharing.

### **Application**

At the end of this passage, Paul referred to the story of the Israelites receiving manna to feed them in the wilderness (Exodus 16:15-18). Every Israelite, Exodus said, gathered only as much manna (food) as they needed. No one tried to "corner the market." Is there a principle in that story that applies to life today? Do you believe Paul's goal of equality is out of date in the 21st century, or worth seeking to seriously live out?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, I find the word "mine" so appealing, but it can make me grasp the assets you give me in trust much too tightly. Teach me how to keep growing into your spirit of generosity. Amen.

### **Thursday, October 6**

#### **Scripture: James 3:17-18**

What of the wisdom from above? First, it is pure, and then peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine. Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.

### **Observation**

James returned to an agricultural image to sum up this wisdom about how to use our speech. Moral action is described in the agricultural terms of sowing and reaping (see Proverbs 22:8; 1 Corinthians 9:11; Galatians 6:7-8). Justice is the outcome of the actions of those who make peace. This is a reminder of Jesus' saying, "Happy are people who make peace, because they will be called God's children" (Matthew 5:9). Jesus refused the siren call of violence, as sounded both by Rome and the zealots who hated Rome. In the end, his influence on leaders like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. (and millions of less famous followers) did more to bring about justice than all the violent movements in his day and since.

### **Application**

Scholar N. T. Wright wrote a stirring challenge: "These characteristics are hard to acquire and hard to maintain. They only appear where there has been a steady habit of prayer and self-discipline; even then they may take a while to show. It would be worth spending the time to work through the words in this list [verse 17] one by one. Do it slowly. Review your life in the light of them. Suppose some of the people you meet every day were like the people in verse 16, and others like the people in verse 17. Which one would you rather see coming towards you down

the street? Which would you rather have as a neighbor? The challenge is how to become that neighbor yourself. And once more the answer is this. Wisdom comes from above. Pray for it. Persevere. Will you accept the challenge?"

### **Prayer**

Loving Jesus, your love, then and now, can look impossibly soft and naïve. Give me a clear view of history, of the ways your love has defeated violence and hate over and over. Give me the courage to live out your love. Amen.

### **Friday, October 7**

#### **Scripture: Matthew 5:1-3**

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up a mountain. He sat down and his disciples came to him. He taught them, saying:

"Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

### **Observation**

Jesus didn't preach the Sermon on the Mount just once, and then move on. Scholar William Barclay noted that the Greek verb translated "taught" describes "repeated and habitual action," and the translation should be: 'This is what he used to teach them.' Matthew's gospel grouped Jesus' teachings into five great sermons (5:1-7:29; 9:35-11:1; 13:2-52; 18:1-35; and 24:1-25:46). Today's passage began the first of those sermons.

### **Application**

Jesus' words may seem strange, since he regards as 'happy people' those who are usually regarded as unfortunate. This alerts us to the topsy-turvy nature of Jesus' teaching. 'Hopeless' (or 'poor in spirit') refers to those who continue to look to God for help in the midst of their present, needy state. What helps you keep looking to God during this time of pre-election, post-pandemic and social disruption?

### **Prayer**

Lord Jesus, somehow your "topsy-turvy" teaching seems particularly fitting for this topsy-turvy time I'm living through. Help me to grasp and hold onto the wonderful news you came to share. Amen.

### **Saturday, October 8**

#### **Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-24**

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are being destroyed. But it is the power of God for those of us who are being saved. It is written in scripture: *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.* Where are the wise? Where are the legal experts? Where are today's debaters? Hasn't God made the wisdom of the world foolish? In God's wisdom, he determined that the world wouldn't come to know him through its wisdom. Instead, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of preaching. Jews ask for signs, and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, which is a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those who are called—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's power and God's wisdom.

### **Observation**

The apostle Paul knew his central message was "foolish" to some and "scandalous" to others. He knew no PR person or mythmaker would try to impress Greeks, Romans or Hebrews with a

crucified savior. Yet he preached Christ crucified as a life-changing physical and spiritual fact with utter conviction. He relied on God's power, not sheer human logic, to change people's lives and thinking. He trusted that God's wisdom and strength were greater than this world's and found that they are.

### **Application**

Imagine you went to hear a great concert pianist. The pianist entered in handcuffs—what? —but then played superbly with nose and chin. Impossible, right? That's a crude image of what many people would think when Paul said the Jesus the Romans crucified was the world's Savior and Lord. Saving the world through the cross defied (and still does) most human ideas about power. In what surprising ways has God's saving power shaped your life? The lives of others you know?

### **Prayer**

Dear God, I am grateful that your strength and wisdom are greater than the world's! I need that—I can't save myself. Help me to trust and depend on you for what I need most. Amen.