

What Is Good

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Lord God, you have declared that your kingdom is among us.
Open our eyes to see it, our ears to hear it,
our hearts to hold it, and our hands to serve it.
This we pray in Jesus' name.
Amen.

Introduction

Micah chapter 6 begins in a courtroom and ends in the sanctuary. The title of the first half of the chapter could be "The Lord v. Israel." The Lord is the plaintiff and Israel is the defendant. The Lord has a legal case against his people—the mountains, hills, and very foundations of the earth are summoned to be the jury. And everyone is called to listen:

"What wrong have I done you?" asks the Lord.

What hardship have I caused you?

I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from bondage.

I've given you good leaders: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

I helped you cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land.

I've turned curses into blessings. But you've forgotten me.

Forgotten what I've done for you.

Remember and recognize the generous acts of the Lord. Don't allow ingratitude to creep into your life. The sentencing God wants is not punishment, but to have a restored relationship with his people. In the second part of the chapter, we move from the courthouse to the house of worship. An individual asks God what it will take to be allowed through those sanctuary doors. Burnt offerings? Calves, rams, and streams of oil? Giving my firstborn?

God lets it be known that divine acceptance isn't about giving extravagant gifts for God, it's about giving of your very self to God. Obedience. And then in the concluding verse, in just three short phrases Micah sums up God's requirements of us. The legal, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of faith and practice.

Let's hear the Word of the Lord to us.

Scripture: Micah 6:1-8 (NRSVue)

¹ Hear what the Lord says:

Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.

² Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the Lord has a case against 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!

⁴ For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.

⁵ O 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."

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?

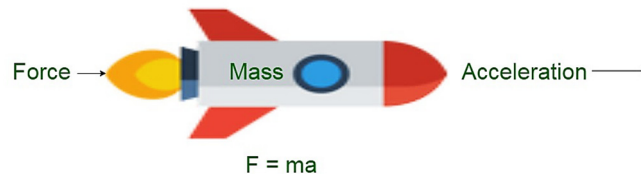
⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

⁸ He 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?

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – “What Is Good”

To boil down complex realities into understandable terms isn't easy. Accurately conveying profound truths simply, without being simplistic, takes countless hours of reflection, preparation, observation, failure, and revision.



Newton's second law of motion is celebrated for its elegance, simplicity, and coverage. $F=ma$. Yet finding that connection of force, mass, and acceleration daunted human minds for centuries.

Then there are succinct Historical Documents:

- The Declaration of Independence: Less than 1500 words long.
- Or the Gettysburg Address: Less than three minutes long. In fact, we don't have a picture of Lincoln delivering it because there wasn't enough time to set up the camera to take it.

World Religions:

- The 4 Noble Truths in Buddhism
- The 5 Pillars of Islam

In our Judeo-Christian faith tradition:

- The 10 Commandments
- The 8 Beatitudes of Christ
- The Lord's Prayer

The Great Commandment:

- Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.

The Golden Rule:

- Treat others as you would like to be treated.
- In fact, you could call Micah 6:8 the Golden Rule of the Old Testament.

The ancient Rabbis said of all the prophets, Micah did the best job of summarizing the heart of all the hundreds of God's commandments given to Moses. 613 commandments were delivered to Moses, but Micah reduced those 613 down to 3:

Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.

It's important to note what God doesn't require of us. God doesn't need an outward show or amazingly costly gestures to somehow buy God's acceptance. We can't transform God's covenant into a contract. It's tempting to want to offer God everything—except for that one thing God longs for—an obedient and loving heart.

It isn't about trying to change God. God wants to change *us*. Paul talks about this inward sacrifice in Romans when he says,

"I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

God wants us. We're the sacrifice. Not calves or rams or rivers of oil. We find true life by dying to ourselves. This is our divine call, our task, the mission given to us where we sacrificially serve God and serve others in the strength God provides. Something happens when we recognize that it's not all about me. That God is God and we are not God. That God is immortal and we are mortal. Our priorities get divinely realigned. There we find ourselves perfectly positioned. God can help us do what we're supposed to do. Do, love, and walk. All action verbs. All indicating real life actions, not ritual affectations.

That's it. Simple, but so intense, so condensed. This is what it's all about. It takes a lifetime to unpack it, to flesh it out.

First, do justice.

When we find ourselves in a position of strength, or good fortune, we don't just look out after ourselves. We help those who have been wronged, neglected, or are in need. The Scriptures teach us: the poor are to be fed, the widows cared for, the orphans nurtured, and the stranger welcomed. With God's strength and wisdom, we can actively uphold and do what's right. We're committed to have integrity in our interactions and relationships. This involves the small things and the big things.

Doing justice transcends what political party we're in. As Christians, whether we're Democrat, Republican, or independent—we've all got to flee from and speak out against oppression, lying, and shady dealings. Not only in our own private world, but in society. We speak up and act for those who are being abused or exploited.

Second, Micah says “love mercy” or kindness.

We're to *do* justice and to *love* mercy. Mercy is our posture, our outlook, our attitude, our way of relating with others—which is characterized by grace, loyalty, kindness, and generosity—not animosity. Mercy—*hesed* in the Hebrew—is a relationship word. We extend God's love to those around us. So we love goodness. We demonstrate acts of kindness.

There's a story of two ancient rabbis who were walking together one day. One lamented the fact that they no longer had the Temple in which to worship God. "But," the other reassured his colleague, "we still have *hesed*." His point was, that even if there was no Temple in which to worship, they could still perform acts of mercy and lovingkindness. God's love never stops with us. God empowers us to exhibit *hesed* in our relationships: in our marriages, in our families, our friendships, workplaces, dealings with strangers, foreigners, or those different from us—wherever we find ourselves. It can't be contained in the sanctuary walls.

To love mercy is a life-long quest of right relationships with our fellow human beings where we show constant love, not hatred. *Hesed* helps us to really see others as Christ sees them. *Hesed* helps us see Christ in them.

Third, walk humbly with your God.

To walk humbly with God is a measured and circumspect way of life that attends to God's will and way. Walking humbly with God means to conduct your life wisely/carefully/completely. It's the opposite of being arrogant or presumptive. In light of God's limitless love, grace, and mercy, you're aware of your limitations.

I recently heard this interesting fact about the presidency. Once the US president is inaugurated, one of the first things they're required to do is plan their funeral. This not only makes the celebration of their lives more meaningful for the nation in a time of grief, but it also is a reminder to the most powerful person on the planet that they too are mortal.

Walking humbly with God you're attuned to reality:

- God is the Creator, we're the created.
- God is our Redeemer, we're the redeemed.
- God is immortal, we're mortal.

Paul described this way of life to the Ephesians: Look carefully how you walk, like sensible, not senseless people . . .

Do not be thoughtless but discern what the Lord's will is. To walk humbly with God also means that we thoughtfully extend God's grace to others.

We lean upon and look to God in everything. Micah goes on in the next verse. If you do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God—then you'll achieve wisdom. You'll live a purposeful, well-lived life.

Social psychologist Roy Baumeister did significant research on what gives human beings meaning in life. He argued that four fundamental questions needed to be addressed in our quest for meaning:

- The question of Identity: *Who am I?*
- The question of Value: *Do I matter?*
- The question of Purpose: *Why am I here?*
- The question of Agency: *Can I make a difference?*

Through this passage, God has graced us with the keys that can unlock the mysteries of why we're here, what we're supposed to do, and how we can do it.

So Micah and our faith helps us find ourselves engaging those 4 questions:

- The question of Identity: *Who am I?* I'm a child of God.
- The question of Value: *Do I matter?* Yes—I'm made in God's image and I'm God's workmanship.
- The question of Purpose: *Why am I here?* To glorify and enjoy God by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.
- The question of Agency: *Can I make a difference?* Yes, God has called me and equipped me through the Holy Spirit to live into this good and joyful purpose for my life.



God is telling us—"don't make it so complicated." God is interested in the simple, that goes to a deep place. The heart of the matter is this: to truly love God and others.

Express commitment and compassion in your relationships. Use the power entrusted to you to serve and bless. This is what is good—what God requires and empowers us to do.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Micah 6:8 eCard", [Crosscards.com](https://www.crosscards.com)

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