

## Walking Humbly

### Micah 6:1-8

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#### Real Audio (2 MB)

In the first two verses of chapter six, the prophet Micah takes us into a courtroom where we are told to "plead our case." We, as the accused, sit in the box. The mountains and hills that have been around since the beginning and have seen everything are the witnesses for the prosecution. To our horror, we discover that the prosecutor is God. And the charge is that we have failed to remember.

In verses three to five, the prosecutor God makes his case against us. He sticks his prophetic finger in our face and demands to know, "What have I done to you? What right do you have to turn away from me, to forget that it was I who brought you out of slavery, gave you a place among the nations, and redeemed you with saving acts? How dare you forget that your life has been created and sustained by my love?"

Notice, unlike other prophets, Micah isn't concerned that we have broken laws. He's concerned that we have broken the heart of God by failing to remember that life is a gracious gift. From the first days after the Exodus, for that matter from the first days after creation, humanity has had a hard time remembering that we live in God's hands. "When you were born, who gave you life? When you were in trouble, who rescued you from disease, the old addictions, bad relationships, and the lost dreams? When you were alone, who gave you every relationship you now cherish?" The sacred prosecutor is unrelenting. "You dared to forget that it was all a gift from me!"

This is a very serious charge, because every time we forget that we exist by the hand of God we begin to act like gods ourselves. Then the worst things start to happen. When mortals try to act like gods they only hurt others.

In the words of Karl Barth, "All sin is rooted in a lack of gratitude." When our hearts are not filled with thanksgiving for what God has done, they are inevitably filled with anxiety over what we have not done. And out of anxiety about ourselves we fail to care for others with the steadfast love with which God has cared for us.

As Micah continues his courtroom drama in verses six and seven, we make our meager defense. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?" We ask ourselves what God wants, and how much we have to give him to take care of this problem. "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? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions?"

These are bad questions, corrupt questions, asked by people trying to bribe their way out of trouble. The questions reveal only how little we remember. The reason God dragged us into court in the first place is we keep acting like we are the gods and he is the one looking for a hand out. This isn't about what God needs. It's all about your calling to live like a man or woman who needs your God.

By the time he gets to verse eight, Micah can't stand it anymore. So he breaks into his own story to speak directly to us. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good." In other words, don't keep asking God what you are supposed to do. And don't keep avoiding your calling with your favorite defense of being confused. "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 most important thing to remember about the requirement to do justice is that you must never, ever confuse it with believing in justice. God is not impressed with the sincerity of our beliefs about social justice or with our ability to lobby for justice, vote for justice, or demand justice for ourselves.

The prophets of the Old Testament do not give us their theory on justice. They just walked the streets of Israel and Judea and were so horrified by what they saw that they told the people to start doing justice, or stop calling themselves the people of God. Similarly, the New Testament tells us nothing about Jesus' personal opinions on justice issues. He resisted the public debates of his day over what should be done with the Samaritan issue, taxation issue, adultery issue, or the Roman occupying army issue. Instead Jesus cared for the people who had been beaten down by these issues, and thus, he did justice.

I believe we all need to have thoughtful positions on the issues that confront our society, but I also believe that is a pretty easy thing. What is much harder is to follow Jesus as he introduces us to the people behind the issues. Or perhaps under the issues. Every justice issue has names, faces, stories that will break your heart. As the founder of the Sojourner Community Jim Wallis has said, we really have no business talking about "the poor" unless we know people who are poor. Do you know poor people? How do you do justice for them if you don't even know them?

But let's not stop there. How do you do justice to the demands of home, children, aging parents, friends who are in need, work, church, PTA, coaching soccer, a country at war, and now we are throwing the poor on top of all that? All these demands pull you in a different direction. So if you do the right thing long enough, sincerely enough, hard enough, do you know what you will soon be saying? That there is too much. To do right by one commitment is only to take time and energy away from another. "I can't do justice to all these demands," we finally exclaim. Well, it gets worse. There is another requirement.

What is required is not that you do justice only because it is right, but because you "love kindness." The word for love in the Hebrew here is *hesed*. It refers to an unshakable, steadfast love that God has shown you. When we add sacred love to justice, it removes the

element of giving people what they deserve, which is so often associated with justice, and substitutes giving people what they need. We do this because that is how God responds to us. When he placed his hesed alongside his justice, he chose to give us not what we deserve, but what we need. Which is what we refer to as grace.

God isn't asking you to make sure that every part of your life gets just what it deserves. He is requiring you to give your heart to the needs of others. Isn't that just like the Bible -- to take something difficult and make it impossible?

We wonder how anyone can meet this requirement. "No one can give his heart away so easily and frequently. I don't have that much heart! How can I give my heart to my colleagues, and my family, and the church, the nation, the poor, and all my needy friends? Can't I just fix them?" No. It was that kind of thinking that got you hauled into court by God. Again, you are not a god who can fix people. The requirement is just to do justice with loving kindness. "But," as we protest against our guilt, "No one can love as faithfully and broadly as God does." Right, and that leads us to the third requirement he has always made of mortals, that we walk humbly with our God. As we sincerely seek to fulfill the first two requirements of doing justice and loving steadfastly, we'll inevitably be thrust into the third of walking humbly.

When will you ever have cared enough of the poor, the sick, or the broken hearted? When are you going to take care of those problems? When will you ever be a good enough parent? When will you ever get the church fully reformed and in order? Never. When will your love ever be as faithful, and steadfast as God's is? Never.

We make that confession, not to get off the hook, but to place ourselves squarely on it. We hold ourselves accountable for doing justice and loving freely, but not because we expect to succeed. Rather, it is because as we try, our hands are kept more tightly within God's hands, and we make room for God to be God.

As your pastor, I am struck by how many of you there are who are really trying to live a good life. You do want to do justice. You would never saying you're trying to do injustice. And you do want to be loving. But you're in court before God with the rest of us, because you keep forgetting that you are not in charge. God never asked you to be the Savior. He asks you to remember that you have a Savior, and to walk humbly with him as you attempt justice and love.

To walk humbly means to remember that there is only one Savior, and to remember that what you have received has come from the bounty of his grace, and to remember, with a grateful heart, that you have received in order to give. When you fail at giving, day after day, rather than giving up as one more burned out do-gooder in Washington, you who walk humbly with God will rise the next morning and try again refreshed in the certain knowledge that God is still God. His Son, Jesus Christ, is still risen from the dead. The Spirit is still at work in the world. All that means anything can happen, on any day. Perhaps a little more justice and love will even break into the world through your life.

God doesn't want to keep you in court for your failures. He just wants you to confess that you need him to be a real human being.

Merciful God, when it comes to walking with you, our confidence is more in your hold of our hands than of our grasp of yours. We are humbled by our many failures, and the losses and hurts of life. Most of all we are humbled by your grace, that always finds those who have lost their way and brings them home again.