

More Than Empty Words

Micah 6:1-8

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Prayer: Feed us with the truth of your Word, Lord, so that we leave this place with the strength and the appetite to do your work in the world. Amen.

“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?”

If you’ve ever stepped into a Christian bookstore or scrolled through Etsy, an online marketplace, you’ve seen Micah 6:8, the verse I just quoted.

It’s on T-shirts, keychains, jewelry, laptop stickers, coffee mugs, and even temporary tattoos. Scholar Jim Nogaski calls it “biblical ethics in a nutshell.”¹

But there’s also a caution here: when we turn a radical word from God into a decorative slogan, we can miss its depth. It becomes a phrase we simply recite, but full of empty words rather than a promise we actually live by. To understand what God is actually saying here, we have to step out of the gift shop, if you will, and walk into a courtroom.

The passage begins with a dramatic scene. Imagine a courtroom where God is the plaintiff, bringing a lawsuit against God’s people. But God doesn’t call humans to the witness stand. Instead, God summons the **mountains and the hills** to testify (Cf. Isa. 1:2).

Why the mountains? Because they have endured through generations. They have witnessed God’s faithfulness across time—liberation, guidance, and provision—and they stand as silent observers of how life has unfolded since then.

This connection between the land and the people isn’t just ancient poetry; it is a physical reality. In Micah’s world, as in ours, ecological violence and social violence go hand-in-hand. We see this today in places like Appalachia, where mountaintop removal mining is literally carving away the geography. When we poison the water to extract profit, we aren’t just

¹ James Nogaski, *The Book of the Twelve: Micah-Malachi*, *Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Heywys, 2011), 573.

hurting the earth; we are threatening the lives of the poorest people in our country. The land itself bears witness to our greed. Our moral lives don't happen in a vacuum—they reverberate through all of creation.

But before God "brings the hammer down" in this courtroom, God asks a heartbreaking question: "O my people, what have I done to you? Answer me!"

In verses 6 and 7, the people finally speak up. But they sound panicked. They ask: *"What does God want? Does God want burnt offerings? Thousands of rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? Does the Lord want my firstborn child?"*

Listen to the escalation in their logic. It's an attempt to turn a relationship into a negotiation. They think: *If I just offer enough, or attend enough, or perform enough, then I've done my part.* They hope that by staying busy with religious traditions, they can convince God to look the other way while they keep their dishonest gains at work.

But Micah gently redirects this thinking. Faith, he reminds them, is not primarily about quantities or transactions. God is not asking for extravagant offerings but for lives shaped by integrity, compassion, and humility. Ritual has its place, but you cannot use it to cover up moral bankruptcy. **Piety divorced from justice isn't faith—it's just a distraction.** They want a bargain; God wants transformed hearts.

Micah's answer is simple and profound. God asks for three things:

1. **To do justice (mishpat):**

This means living with fairness and honesty, and seeking the well-being of the whole community.

2. **To love kindness (hesed):**

This is steadfast, covenant love—care that is loyal, generous, and sustaining.

3. **To walk humbly with your God:**

This is a posture of attentiveness, recognizing God's presence in daily life and in the people around us, especially the marginalized.

Throughout history, these words have continued to inspire. In 1989, labor leader César Chávez quoted Micah 6:8 as he spoke about the dignity and safety of farmworkers. For him, the verse captured a vision of justice rooted

in compassion and shared humanity. He recognized that a justice system fueled by corporate greed is the opposite of the "Exodus freedom" Micah describes.²

From the ancient prophets like Micah to modern leaders like Cesar Chavez, we still hear this same clarion call for justice echoing in our streets today. It's a plea to lead with a heart for the people rather than a focus on profit or power. This kind of justice—the one we find in the story of the Exodus—doesn't find its strength in walls, fences, or force. Instead, it's built on love in action: the kind of love that sets people free and helps everyone truly flourish.

Now, a quick word of caution: it's easy to create a divide here that isn't actually there. We often pit "ritual" against "justice," or "religion" against "spirituality."

But Micah never tells the people to abandon their sacred traditions; the problem isn't religion itself, but using religion as a shield to ignore mercy. On the flip side, we cannot use our passion for social justice as an excuse to walk away from prayer and worship. To choose one over the other is to miss the point—we need both the inward breath of prayer and the outward hand of service to be whole.

This balance of faith and action leads us to something powerful: Micah 6:8 is written in the singular. It is addressed to each person individually. This call is personal.

Because it is personal, it requires more than feeling overwhelmed by the weight of the world. Rather, it invites us into faithful response. God is not seeking perfect thoughts or grand gestures. God is seeking love that takes shape in real, embodied ways.

Here are a few gentle practices we might consider:

- Look for one small way to act justly this week.
- Offer kindness to someone with no expectation in return.

² Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback, eds. *The Words of César Chávez* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), 150.

- Walk with humility that listens as much as it speaks.

These steps may not change the whole world at once, but they can transform the places where we live and love. May it be so. **Amen.**