

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
January 14, 2018

The Church's Business

Micah 6:1-16

In today's Scripture from Micah, God takes his people to court. Of course this isn't the first time that God has argued a case against his own people. He's no stranger to lawsuits. So once again he starts gathering a jury to hear the evidence. In this case, the entire creation is his jury pool. He summons neither angels nor prophets but hills and mountains. Apparently God figures that since these have been around so long they've probably seen about everything. In fact, the Lord instructs everything from the highest peak to the "everlasting foundations of the earth" to hear the evidence. The whole cosmos will listen as God calls his people to account.

Now at this point, we would expect God to start presenting his evidence. We would expect him to begin laying out a list of crimes committed or acts of disobedience. This is the time to put his people on the stand for questioning. Perhaps God will begin by asking them, "What have you done?" But instead, God asks, "What have I done?" You can almost hear the hurt, the disappointment, the pleading in God's opening questions. "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you?" (v. 3)

God's questions imply that his people have grown weary of serving him. When God sees their failure to hold up their end of the covenant, he takes it as a sign that he has become a burden to his own people. Based on the way they're behaving, they must be tired of living for him and following his way. "Tell me," says the Lord. "Testify here in the presence of these witnesses. How have I burdened you? What have I done to you?"

The truth is, the Lord hasn't done anything to cause their behavior. The key question, therefore, isn't, What have I done to you?, but rather, What have I done for you? That's when God starts reciting the story of salvation, hitting some of the high points in his relationship with his people. He delivered them from slavery in Egypt. He gave them leaders. He blessed them through the foreign priest Balaam. He brought them into the promised land. This is a God who is faithful no matter what. He has shown his faithfulness through his acts of deliverance.

Now it's the people's turn to reply. They don't even really try to deny the charges or defend themselves against God's accusations. Instead, they answer with a question about what God expects in return. "Lord, what can we do to please you, especially in a situation like this where we've gone astray and need to make things right with you again?" It turns out that the people already have an answer in mind. They'll simply revert to what's familiar. They'll organize a worship service and make sacrifices. In other words, they'll have church. They'll sing some songs, say some prayers, and read some Scriptures. They'll share some testimonies, listen to a sermon, and pass the plate. They even talk about taking their offerings and sacrifices to ridiculous lengths. Maybe write a check to the church for a million dollars, or fast indefinitely, or organize an around-the-clock prayer vigil for the next year, or break ground on a massive new sanctuary trimmed with precious metals, with a

crystal cross on top. Whatever it takes to appease God and get things back to where they need to be.

But the Lord will have none of it. He won't tolerate playing church, or going about business-as-usual spirituality. Not because the Lord doesn't want his people to worship, and to worship sacrificially, but because our worship doesn't exempt us from the divine demands of justice and mercy. After all, it's not as if God hasn't made his expectations clear. "He has showed you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (v. 8). This is one of the Bible's most beloved texts. It fits well on a bumper sticker, in a political speech, or on a PowerPoint slide during morning worship. But it's the kind of command that's easier to recite with our lips than to realize in our lives.

Last Sunday, I preached on the importance of storing up good things in your heart, so that your life of following Jesus is basically the overflow of the things that you accumulate. This means that an authentic relationship with Jesus inwardly will take shape outwardly in your pursuit of justice and mercy in the world. One man tells about a time when he participated in a community service day in Compton, California. He was part of a team of church volunteers who had been doing a complete makeover of a local house. On his way to the house he passed a married couple working in their yard. The woman inquired about what they were doing down the street, and commented on the neighborhood transformation she had seen through their simple acts of goodness. When her husband walked over, he looked into the volunteer's eyes and said, "I love your heart. Where can I get a heart like yours?" To which he replied, "We got our hearts from Jesus, and he would be glad to give you one like his, too." That led to further conversation about the gospel of Jesus and his power to change hearts, homes, neighborhoods, and cities.¹

When God calls us, his people, to account, he's looking for more than just a return to the familiar rituals of our faith. He expects more than just the go-to response of, "Well, let's try to put things right with the Lord by doing more church." No, God goes deeper. He requires change of heart and change of life. Acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God—that's the evidence of genuine heart change among God's people.

Pastor Tim Keller has written about how our commitment to justice and mercy is the surest sign of a real relationship with God. Keller says, "A deep social conscience, and a life poured out in service to others, especially the poor, is the inevitable sign of real faith, and justice is the grand symptom of a real relationship with God. If you know Him, it will be there. It may come slowly, but it will come. If it doesn't, you don't have the relationship you think you have."²

As Keller stresses, living in right relationship with God is inseparable from a deep concern for justice. Behind God's call for his people to act justly is the biblical concept of shalom. We often translate shalom as "peace," but in the Bible, shalom has to do with more than just the absence of conflict. God's shalom, God's peace, is about universal wholeness and flourishing. It's about complete reconciliation and restoration in every dimension of life—physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, social, economic, and so on, in keeping with God's will and purpose for his creation. So what does it mean for us to "do justice" or to "act justly"? It means, as Keller puts it, "to go to places where the fabric of shalom has broken down, where the weaker members of society are falling through the fabric, and to repair it."³ How we go about this can take many forms. There are many ways for we who have been saved by the grace of God to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our Savior. Today, I want us to focus on one area of action that our text itself stresses, namely economic matters.

It's easy to stop at the end of verse 8, once God tells us that what he requires is justice, loving-kindness, and a humble walk with him. But there's more after that. In the verses that follow, God reiterates his opposition to evil. And one of the primary things he cannot and will not tolerate is economic injustice. In verses 10-12, God focuses on the cheating, stealing, and lying that go on in the name of commerce. As one version renders these verses, the Lord says, "Do you expect me to overlook obscene wealth you've piled up by cheating and fraud? Do you think I'll tolerate shady deals and shifty scheming? I'm tired of the violent rich bullying their way with bluffs and lies."⁴ Here is a prophetic reminder to us that matters of business are part of the church's business in the world.

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. One of the things King did in his prophetic witness was remind us that issues of racial reconciliation are inseparable from issues of economic inequality. At the time of his assassination, King was planning a poor people's march on Washington that was to include not only African Americans but also Latinos, Native Americans, and poor Appalachian whites. As journalist Eugene Robinson has put it, King "envisioned a rainbow of the dispossessed, assembled to demand not just an end to discrimination but a change in the way the economy doles out its spoils."⁵

Over the past five decades, our country has made a lot of progress on race relations and accompanying issues of economic justice. But there are still major disparities in our nation. In many ways affluence has grown, but so have many of the glaring inequalities. And this is true across lines of race and ethnicity. So when we look at economic realities through the lens of Scripture, through the voice of prophets like Micah, and through the crystal clear expectations of God, confirmed in what he has revealed through Christ, there's still a great gap between the way things are and the way they're intended to be in God's shalom.

In today's text, when God responds to his people's plans to go back and do more church, he doesn't really tell them anything new. "I've already shown you what's good and righteous," says the Lord. "In my law, I revealed the path of life. Micah himself is just one in a series of prophets who've been preaching the same basic sermon. It's not actually that complicated. Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with me, especially in matters of commerce."

Remember that matters of business are always part of the church's business. Our mission includes economics. When we pass the plate on Sunday morning, we're not just contributing to the ongoing operation of our church. We're each recognizing that our lives are intertwined with one another in a web of relationships that includes the sharing and distribution of money. When we collect the offering, we're acknowledging that all we are, and all we have, belong to the God who through Christ has rescued us from bondage to sin and death, forgiven our sins, and made us his people, so that we can declare his praises and spread the news of his saving reign. And that reign includes the creation of economic wholeness for others, especially those who are most vulnerable and poor.

There's a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania who has spent years trying to quantify the economic value that a congregation adds to its community. His calculations take into account a whole range of services and activities that go on in a church, especially large urban congregations. But many of the categories he uses could also apply to a small church like ours. Things like the number of hours that many of you volunteer here at the church. The payments that are made to local companies in order to do building repairs and enhancements. The economic impact of helping people get off drugs or alcohol. The money that church members spend at local businesses. The jobs created and incomes generated by having a day care ministry in our church. The ways that money from the church budget

is spent in ways that stimulate the local economy. The ways that our church, or partnering agencies, provide financial and material assistance to individuals and families in need.

What's more, there are other parts of our life together as God's people that may be harder to measure but are just as important. For instance, not only giving to the benevolence fund, but also making changes that lead to a simpler lifestyle geared less toward consumption and more toward a better distribution of resources. Or not only doing a Bible lesson on racial reconciliation, but also advocating for legislation that helps address biases in the criminal justice system. Or not only singing hymns on Sunday morning, but also starting a music program for disadvantaged children at the neighborhood community center. Or not only paying attention to announcements in the bulletin, but also paying attention to news developments on tax policy, the minimum wage, payday loans, welfare reform, job outsourcing, or Social Security. All these issues, and others like them, are part of the business of being the church in a world where God has to keep reminding us of what we already know, namely, to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

¹ Bill White, Paramount, California, at <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/november/6110810.html>>.

² Timothy Keller, "The Beauty of Biblical Justice." ByFaith website. October 26, 2010. Accessed January 10, 2018 <<http://byfaithonline.com/the-beauty-of-biblical-justice/>>.

³ Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Riverhead, 2010) 177.

⁴ *The Message*, by Eugene H. Peterson.

⁵ Eugene Robinson, "MLK's Prophetic Call for Economic Justice." The Washington Post website. January 15, 2015. Accessed January 11, 2018 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/eugene-robinson-mlks-call-for-economic-justice/2015/01/15/3599cb70-9cfe-11e4-96cc-e858eba91ced_story.html?utm_term=.032fb5f3f80a>.