

## Why pay attention to Micah?

Psalm 46, Micah 6:1-8

About all, most of us know about the prophet Micah is this famous verse, “God has showed you, O humans, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”

This is one of the most memorable statements in the Bible defining a proper relationship to our Creator. It summarizes major themes found in the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets. Notice it uses the singular instead of the plural. This makes God’s accusation personal, even though Micah is speaking to the people and leaders of Israel. He is saying, act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

The fact that people know this verse from Micah’s sixth chapter and probably not **Micah 3:3** “(You) who eat my people’s flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces, who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot,” is okay. Micah’s celebrated verse hits close to the heart of the book’s overall concern. We often think the Old Testament prophets only have gloom and doom as well as focus on sins – so we tend to briefly mention them or ignore them. We hate to be confronted & uncomfortable. Sometimes, we hear the truth and – hate it! Therefore, we can miss the messages of hope the prophets offer us. But warnings are important. So is encouragement.

It’s also good for us to understand Israel’s history. We are starting a book study of Micah. We will go through the book, section by section, to get a sense of the richness of this book and its prophetic witness of what God detests as well as wants from us. So even though this is the first sermon in this series, we will go back to chapter one to help us learn and appreciate the Bible’s prophets.

Micah, along with Jeremiah after him, and all the Old Testament prophets, reprimanded the political and religious leaders of Judah who believed Zion, Jerusalem was indestructible. In the Bible the terms Zion and Jerusalem are

usually inter-changeable. They usually refer to the whole nation or the leaders of Israel. Like the heretics of the early church, that we looked at in our study of Colossians, Micah’s religious and political opponents had some of the Bible on their side, but not all of it. It’s the same today as every religion debates what is core.

Similar dynamics led to the Reformation. Even today we all choose which parts of the Bible to inform our theology and give focus on. The Bible within the Bible for Mennonites is the **Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5 – 7.**

An interesting study would be to examine what pastors, each with their personalities, theological & denominational bent, preach most about. For example, which ones don’t preach much from the Old Testament’s community justice focus messages and which ones do?

Micah’s opponents loved Psalm 46, but forgot, say, the whole of Deuteronomy. They had ignored justice, mercy, humbleness, proper devotion, & cautiousness toward the Almighty. Micah called them to task for this. No one likes to be reminded of some things. Even us. But Micah calls us to task for this. Because, left to our own religious and political sensibilities, and biases, the banality of evil lurks around every corner of our lives and of society.

Micah’s most famous verse appears at first glance as a call to get our act together. **“Act,” “love,” and “walk.”** This famed triad is easy for sermon outlines. But on second glance, **Micah’s appeal might be better seen as a plea of affection and devotion from Israel’s God.** Usually, this verse is preached as an appeal to be more obedient and faithful. But let’s see how Micah 6:8 is a lover’s call. It is a lover’s plea in a courtroom drama between God and God’s people, between Yahweh and us.

Just use your **imagination that the book of Micah is in a courtroom.** Read the book with this understanding and when you get to this verse, imagine the courtroom. The mountains and foundations of the earth, representing all of creation, are witnesses. If you are a Lord of the

Rings fan, think Treebeard and his wisdom, perspective, and aged stability. These ancient witnesses arbitrate the Lord's dispute with his people. Despite the cosmic grand scene, the characters of these witnesses are straight-forward. The height & depths of the earth. The defendants are the nation Israel, it's people and it's religious & political leaders. The prosecutor is the Lord Almighty Creator Holy God.

**(Micah 6:1-2)** But something shocking occurs. God as prosecutor starts arguing for the defense. This never happens in court. The prosecuting attorney and the defense attorney's roles are adversarial. They are in a battle, or at a minimum, a competition to win the judgement for their clients. They each use every legal rule, precedent, and creative arguments to make their cases. They are not merciful to or for the other side. Please multitask by reading what's on the screen as I keep talking.

The defendants are told, "Plead your case, hear the Lord's accusation, he is lodging a charge against you." But then, **verse 3**, the prosecutors tone changes. God asks, "What have I done to you? How have I burdened you?" Instead of digging for evidence and accusing Israel, God's asking, "How have I done you wrong? Why has our relationship broken? Why are we in this courtroom?" Notice, the Almighty puts himself on the defensive. He's vulnerable.

God then lays out a brief picture of the Creator's history with Israel. **Verse 4**. He mentions their being freed from slavery in Egypt. Being provided the leadership of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Help against opposition in the mention of Balaam & King Balak. God reminds them of his efforts to help them in their redemptive history. From the rescue in Egypt, to the threats in the wilderness, to their first night in the Promised Land in Gilgal, God points out his redeeming grace toward Israel. **Verse 5**.

We could say this is just a great legal tactic, as it moves the focus to personal relationship, and tries to downplay the adversarial situation. But it's much more than a courtroom tactic. It's like a parent reminding a difficult child, of any age,

"Haven't you received a roof over your head, food, and help toward university?" Or an employer saying to an employee, "You have been provided a good paying job in this work-place, and supported despite your family difficulties, so why did you steal from me?"

"How exactly have I been a burden to you?" That's a loaded question! It's asking, "What are the actual facts of our relationship?" We see this in **verses 6 and 7**. This is a great way of altering the conversation. To get to the deeper, more important issues. Even though this is not an accusation of specific crimes here, it's a focus on the bigger picture. It's a different way to accuse Israel of not following their Savior and of disobedience. God becomes the defendant because he reminds Israel of his love for them. Why have they been ignoring him and their call to follow and to fully identify with their Creator?

We can also see this question as one of God pleading. "What have I done wrong? How can I do better for our relationships? Don't you get the depth and wideness of my love? Why can't you match my holiness?"

We see this in verses 6 and 7. God becomes the prosecution again. He asks **5 key questions** that we dare not misunderstand. These present a call, we even could say a plea to higher religion – a more faithful religion, a more holy religion.

These 2 verses may be Micah speaking for the people of Israel. Or is he ironically speaking for God – as another attorney in the courtroom? I don't think it really matters whether Micah or God or even the people of Israel are asking, because they get to the core of religious ritual – our response to the Almighty. These questions contrast external religion with internal true religion. These are ironic questions based on why this courtroom scene is even taking place.

Up to now in Micah, there has been mostly one rebuke and condemnation after another, with a few messages of grace and hope. But now these questions focus in on the core external rituals of their religion – the theme of sacrifice which was & is important to worship. Micah does not deny

the need for sacrifices but shows that it does no good to offer them without obedience.

The first 3 questions deal with animal sacrifice. The tradition was that to worship, one had to offer some kind of sacrifice. For example, Joseph and Mary needed to buy a pair of doves or two young pigeons when they presented Jesus at the temple. It was expected that to worship in the temple in Jerusalem – you had to have some animal sacrifice.

But the **first question** dives right into the core problem. “With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?” It is a great opening question, and many theologians see this as a question that refers to the poor. If you could not afford an offering – even some birds, how would you worship? Did this cut poor people off from all worship and contact with the Lord Almighty? (**verse 6a**)

**The next rhetorical question**, “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” focuses on those who can afford a nice good sacrifice. It’s a sarcastic question that asks, “Are the people who can afford this kind of sacrifice more worthy? Are they better religious faithful people? (**verse 6b**)

Then the **third question, verse 7a**, really shows how ridiculous and scandalous the whole religious ritual and temple worship system was. “Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?” This question is a reference to the super rich, King Hezekiah, the king of Micah’s time. He had the habit of offering unspeakable quantities of offerings. It’s like asking, “Are the rich and powerful the best worshippers of all? Does this kind of demonstration make the king and the rich the most acceptable to God?” And it causes us to ask, “Can we buy our salvation?”

The implied answer to each of these 3 questions is clearly “No!” despite the sacrificial system. The prosecutor has returned to his arguments. But it gets worse. In contrast to the first three questions that deal with sacrificial products from the farm, barn, and orchard, the **last two**

**questions, verse 7b**, rolled into one, are about human sacrifice. “Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression? Shall I offer the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” There is double emphasis on this heathen practice. The custom in many areas at the time back then, was to offer your first-born child, your personal first fruit, to your heathen god as a child sacrifice.

Archaeologists keep finding the remaining bones & ashes of sacrificed children deposited in urns at the corners of houses – tied into the idea of laying the cornerstone. This practice seemed to not go away with the giving of the law and the ten Commandments. There is evidence it continued right up till the end of Israel’s monarchy. It is why there are so many verses condemning child sacrifice in the Bible. You would think the practice of burning one’s child as an offering to try to remove one’s sin was extremely offensive to any god, much less their Creator God. But despite all their Creator had done for Israel, many kept doing it! No wonder the prophets of the OT were so angry!

So, it should not be a surprise the Almighty God sent his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. The message is, we humans are so bad, that our Creator decided this is what it would take to redeem us, to get our attention and to get us on the right track of worshipful life habits.

It was clear the religious sacrificial system and worship had overtaken real worship. External religious practices are always contrasted with internal religious practices, attitudes, & habits. Micah’s five questions are not just for the past. **They get to the heart of our worship today.** We should ask ourselves, Micah’s first question, **“With what shall I come before the Lord & bow down before the exalted God?”** We tend not to offer child or animal sacrifices today, but how should we worship, obey and please God today, in 2022?

Micah has one of the key biblical answers. Verse 8 is like a **parent’s affectionate plea** to a rebellious lost child. “I want the best for you. I want good for you. I want you to be grateful for the blessings you receive from me. I want you to

have a better, real relationship with me. I want the best for you so I'm discouraging you from persisting in the ungrateful behavior that has disrupted our relationship." **Verse 8.**

If this were taking place in a courtroom, this would be mindboggling – especially if the prosecutor pleads with the defense. But that is what God does! We are offered an invitation to a life of real worship, holiness, peace, and joy. We are called to remember who we are in our Creator's eyes. We are requested and appealed to take up a life marked by gratitude in the light of the knowledge of God and ourselves. We are reminded to remember our primary identity, who we are, objects of God's redeeming grace.

But it is so easy to simplify moral issues down to – do this & don't do that. Sing only old hymns in a church with benches. Do not dance or use alcohol or drugs or have sex out of wedlock. Wear a wedding ring & do not get tattoos. These are important, but way too often they cause amnesia about the key parts of faith. Act, walk and love as the Bible explains it. Justice, mercy, and humbleness are important to our Savior. These worshipful fruits of grace, gratitude, and obedience are far more important than sacrifices. Too often we only go part of the way in worship – just to the point of becoming uncomfortable. But as Micah & the prophets explain repeatedly, that is why we get caught up in false worship.

To close I want to offer an illustration. The prophets kept saying in various ways, that our good behavior isn't enough. We need to live this verse 8 in every facet of our lives. Rose & I are enjoying watching the TV series, Blue Heelers from Australia. The setting is a police station in a rural small town. It is a fascinating show with criminals caught, the police characters face challenges, and at times, the real wrong doers can not be prosecuted. Why?

Several shows offer situations where children are caught in crimes. The parents have offered all the benefits of wealth to their children, but not love. Not biblical mercy, or justice or humbleness. And clearly not common sense. They are especially not being examples of the

values of the Fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control. And they spend as little time with their children as possible.

In most cases the children commit the crimes to either get back at their parents, or to get their full attention beyond material goods, or to try to get the type of parenting they need. These episodes end with the frustration of the police, especially the Senior Sargent, the chief of the police station, towards the parents who simply do what looks good, the basics – shelter, food, and education. But they do not offer the depth & breath of what real parenting involves. The parents protest they did what they thought best for their children. But it becomes clear, they were far short of acts of true love, instruction, being there, and so on.

What does Yahweh want from us? Sacrifice is not dismissed as unnecessary. Morals, and law requirements are not ignored. A proper heart attitude to God is not dismissed. Fulfilling **religious and cultural requirements** do not fully help us with salvation. Simply put, our Creator wants more - our complete selves. Our worship through our lifestyle, attitudes, work relationships, and priorities. The list is endless.

King David in Psalm 51 (16-17) nails it as well as any of the many Bible verses. **“God, you do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; God you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.”**

That was and is the loving God's rebuke to Israel and to us today. Verse 8 is a lovers call to the grace of reflection and repentance, to a life shaped from the beginning to end by the grace of God shown to us in Jesus Christ.

How are we doing in fully living this verse? “He has told you, mortals, what is good in His sight. What else does the Eternal ask of you But to live justly and to love kindness and to walk with your True God in all humility?”