

## ***What Does God Want?***

Micah 6:6-8

Steve Hollaway  
Harbor Church  
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Late in his career, Sigmund Freud said, “The great question that has never been answered, and which I have not yet been able to answer, despite my thirty years of research into the female soul is ‘What does a woman want?’”

That great question will go unanswered this morning, but it is similar to the question that the religious people ask the prophet in our text this morning: “What does *God* want?” They ask it in the same exasperated tone as Freud. “What the *heck* does God want, anyway? How can you please a God?”

As you heard when we read the first part of Micah 6, God is accusing his people, bringing a lawsuit against them—that’s what the word “controversy” here means. I’m charging you with an offense. If you read through the whole chapter you discover that the crimes at issue are ripping off the poor and using violence against them. But here at the beginning God asks, “O my people, what have I ever done to you that you would so neglect me and the requirements of my covenant with you? Are you just tired of me? Have I disappointed you?” Then God reminds them: “You were slaves, remember. I’m the one who brought you out of Egypt. I’m the one who saved you and brought you into this land.”

Yahweh, the saving-liberating God is barely through and hasn’t even gotten to his brief against the people when a voice from the crowd starts to make excuses. It’s as if the people roll their collective eyes and say, “There you go again.” *What does Yahweh want? What shall I bring when I come into his presence? Should I try to please him by sacrificing a year-old calf? No, that’s not enough. Will thousands of sheep be enough to please him? Would he be satisfied if I poured out rivers of olive oil on his altar? I don’t think so. What does he want—my firstborn child as payment for my terrible sins? Give me a break.* These are not the sincere questions of a seeker. These are the sarcastic questions of a thirteen-year-old tired of a nagging parent—or maybe of a middle aged man like Freud who can’t ever please his wife.

But then in Micah 6:8 comes the answer of the prophet. “What does God want? Yahweh has already told you what he requires. It’s not about sacrifices. It’s not about coming to worship. You already know what he wants: do justice, care about love, and humbly obey God.”

What God wants is not for us to be very faithful in playing church. He’s not all that interested in religion. What God wants is justice and mercy. God wants us to walk the walk, not just talk the talk or sing the songs. This is a familiar theme in the prophets of the Old Testament. The book of Isaiah starts with an oracle that is very similar to Micah’s. Yahweh is unhappy with his people for cheating one another, selling their souls, and failing to stand up for the poor. He’s had it with the charade of religion. God says, “No more burnt offerings. I’m sick of blood. Stop trampling my courts. Your incense can’t overcome the stink of your behavior. I don’t want one more meeting. I don’t want one more worship service. Here’s what I want: ‘learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow’ (1:17 NRSV).”

The prophet Amos, a layman from the South, said the same thing to the people of the Northern Kingdom. Speaking for Yahweh, he announced, “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.” I will not accept your offerings. “Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down

like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” Justice is equated with righteousness, as it often is in the Old Testament. Worship without justice is a waste of effort and an offense to God. It’s a charade. The purpose of worship is to allow you to draw close to me, God is saying, but if you’re not going to obey me, just forget it. All three prophets—Micah, Isaiah, Amos—say that what God really wants above all is not worship but justice.

Do we even believe in a God of justice? The Episcopal preacher Fleming Rutledge said that if you ask white Americans to describe God, they will talk about a God of love or mercy or compassion. Very few would volunteer that God is just. African-American Christians are much more likely to talk about a God of justice, because they have been victims of injustice. Like the Hebrews, they come from the experience of slavery and it matters to them that the God of the Bible and the God of Jesus is a God who establishes justice in an unjust world. [“The Justice and Righteousness of God,” 1-25-07, [http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/rutledge\\_5022.htm](http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/rutledge_5022.htm).]

What does the Bible mean by justice? What does *God* mean when he says that justice is what he wants? When God calls for justice, it doesn’t mean for criminals to be punished, as we do when we talk about the “Department of Justice.” Here’s a definition from a scholar named Paul Mercer: “It reflects a creative generosity (distributive justice) which we might call ‘the spirit of justice.’ It is never used to speak of punishment (retributive justice). It deals with God’s positive action in creating and sustaining community, particularly on behalf of the marginal members (the poor).” [“Justice and Health in the Bible” cited in David Ruis, *The Justice God Is Seeking*, p. 58] Here’s part of the definition of justice in *The Holman Bible Dictionary*: “To oppress is to use power to one’s advantage in depriving others of their basic rights in the community. To do justice is to correct that abuse and to meet those needs.”

In the Law and the Prophets justice is something that is supposed to be provided to certain marginalized groups: widows, orphans, resident aliens, wage earners, the poor, prisoners, slaves, and the sick. When Jesus came, he said that he came for those people. His brother James said that pure religion is to care for those. It’s easy to overlook the emphasis on justice in the New Testament because translators try to make a difference between justice and righteousness when there is only one word in the Greek, *dikaiosune*, and for that matter in Latin, where it is *iustus*. It’s one word, but in contemporary English it is an entirely different thing to say you are seeking justice vs. saying you are seeking righteousness. Justice, in our way of thinking, is social, while righteousness is personal. But there is no such difference in the Bible; personal and social are integrated.

If you are willing to use the word justice in translating, you hear Jesus saying in the Sermon on the Mount, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice,” and “Seek first God’s reign and his justice.” Jesus looks over the crowds of his day—like the crowds we have seen in the streets of Cairo the last few days—and he sees the people as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd, as weak ones without anyone to protect them from the oppression of religion and politics and the hedonism of the privileged classes. It seems clear that from the very beginning of the Christian movement the followers of Jesus understood care for the poor as their core ministry. That’s the first controversy in the church—making sure that all the widows of different Jewish ethnicities get served fairly, with justice. The second controversy was whether the church would admit Gentiles, and it is revealing that when Paul reports on the Jerusalem Conference over that issue in Galatians 2:10, he says that James and Peter and the leaders in Jerusalem “asked us only that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.”

This is not a side matter for the church, as if worship was the main thing, or evangelism. These things all go together: Sharing the gospel, enjoying God together, praying for one another,

and providing justice for the poor and defenseless. I am not saying this because I am a political liberal or a theological liberal. I am saying this because I am reading the Bible and paying attention to the same prophets whose words Jesus had rattling around in his head.

What does Micah say God wants? Justice, yes. And then mercy—but the word for mercy in Hebrew in this case is that word *hesed* that is usually translated faithful love, or lovingkindness, or covenant faithfulness. to “love mercy” here means to “love love,” to care more about loving one another than anything else. And “to walk humbly with thy God” means of course to recognize our low position in relation to God, but here the emphasis really falls on “walk”—which in both the Old Testament and New Testament often means to live, to follow a certain way of life. So I would translate Micah 6:8 more like “What does God want? That you are just and work for justice, that you care about faithfully loving, and that you live out the covenant with God in daily life.”

The part of this we overlook most in our churches today is doing justice. That sounds political to us, like something Martin Luther King would push, or something lawyers and minorities talk about. But if we are about living in the kingdom of God, praying that God’s reign would come on earth, that in other words God’s will would be done on earth as it already is in heaven—then surely God’s will as revealed in the Bible is that the poor be treated with equity and that justice be established for every class that is oppressed. That is not Marxist talk; it’s Bible talk.

Acts of mercy are important. Feeding the widows is pure religion. But doing justice is not limited to providing charity. Justice includes tackling the forces that keep people poor. It’s a great thing to have Helping Hands to hand out food—and this week coats—to the poor on the island. But at some point we have to ask “Is there something we can do to solve the problems that make people desperate on this island in the winter?” Like the lack of an economic base to sustain year-round population since the loss of farming and fishing. Like the ridiculous cost of housing and the even more ridiculous cost of electricity. Like the cost of child care and travel to the mainland for medical or psychological care.

I believe that the God of the Bible wants us to address justice issues, not in some abstract way in a bull session and not in Washington, but on this island. Here are eight local justice issues, for starters:

1. The gap between the poor and the rich on the island. We bemoan what’s happening in America as a whole over the last 30 years, but who are we to talk? Look around. It’s like Bombay or Calcutta around here. Huge empty houses of the rich with an underemployed underclass living in poverty. Is it a moral issue in India but not on Block Island?
2. Keeping taxes low for landowners so that the landless have no social services.
3. Putting up with the cost of electricity, which is a nuisance to the rich but devastating to the poor.
4. Substandard housing for summer workers which is tolerated because most of them are foreigners.
5. The widespread assumption that the poor are poor because of some fault of their own, when the Bible clearly teaches that the poor are oppressed by the rich but have been chosen by God to be spiritually rich.
6. The assumption that the mentally ill are morally defective. That’s a justice issue.
7. The assumption that men are incapable of raising children, especially if they don’t have enough money for lawyers.

8. Finally—and I know I have short history here, and efforts have been made in the past—but there is an apparent lack of drive to create year-round jobs for working class residents if it means compromising the viewsheds of the rich. Here's the justice issue I see: putting aesthetics ahead of survival for some people. It's one thing to be concerned about protecting the environment and our community's health; it's another thing to value a pretty picture over creating jobs for people who need them. If you're going to have an absolute prohibition of development in order to keep everything just as it is, justice requires that you create a little welfare state on the island to take care of the poor that you already have living here—or else ship them off the island to a place where they can find jobs, and just put up a sign that says “This is a gated community: your kind is not welcome here.”

Is it plausible to you that God really cares about issues like that? That's not the *only* thing God cares about. God *does* want us to worship him and enjoy his presence. God wants us to pray and to love him. God wants us to believe in his Son Jesus Christ and find life in him. God wants us to love one another in the fellowship of the church.

But here's what the prophets point us to—and I'd say Jesus and James as well: that if we love God with all our hearts we will love what God loves—justice, the poor, the widows, the orphans, the prisoners, the outcast, the sinners. If we have God's Spirit in us, we will be moved to right the wrongs we see around us—not as an exercise of power or ideology but because of righteousness, because we want people to be treated God's way, because we want God's will to be done. Micah, and Isaiah, and Amos all remind us that if we come to worship and yet are getting advantages from systems that—on purpose or not—are hurting the poor, then God doesn't really want our worship and our prayers. God wants us to do justice.