

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, January 26, 2014**

**WHAT DOES GOD WANT?**

**Micah 6:1-8**

I was a college student the first time I can recall encountering this passage of Scripture in a meaningful way. On a December Sunday evening long, long ago, the Dean of the Chapel at Grove City College, a large, imposing man with a booming voice and a captivating preaching style, preached a sermon on these verses from Micah 6 entitled “What God Wants for Christmas.” If I had ever even read Micah 6 before – I probably had, though I can’t say for sure – the significance of the Lord’s message to His covenant people in this portion of His Word had flown completely over my head. Until that Sunday evening. That evening I learned that “what God wants for Christmas” – really, what God wants from me (and you) at all times and in the midst of all of life’s twists and turns – is to do justice, to love mercy (or kindness), and to walk humbly with Him, never forgetting for even a nanosecond that He is God and I am not.

This is a weighty passage of Scripture, and not just because of Micah’s climactic declaration in verse 8. Micah was not from the big city. He was born and raised in the small, obscure village of Moresheth, about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem. He lived and carried out his ministry as a prophet, declaring the word of God to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, from around 735-690 BC, which would make him a contemporary of other prophets such as Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos.

This time period in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, prior to the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, was an era of affluence, a period of prosperity in both Israel and Judah. The economy was robust. Despite outward appearances, though, not all was well in these two nations. The gap between the haves and the have-nots was getting wider and wider. The rich were getting richer, while the poor were becoming poorer. The spiritual condition of God’s covenant people was anything but healthy. It was a time of shallow religion and spiritual decay. This spiritual decay, this persistent rejection of God and His Word, would lead to the downfall of Israel in 722 BC and, more than a century later, the Babylonian conquest of the southern kingdom of Judah in 587 BC.

Micah’s mission as a spokesman for God was to bring the spiritual condition of God’s people out into the open, to declare God’s hatred of their sins and pronounce the Lord’s coming judgment on Israel and Judah. But that is not all. His mission was also to remind the wayward people of God’s persistent, unchanging, long-suffering love for them, and to call them – again – to repent of their sinful ways and turn back to God. Micah was especially bothered by the prevalence of injustice in society and the insincerity of the people’s worship practices.

What we have in Micah 6 is actually a covenant lawsuit brought by God against the Jewish people – the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – the nation He had delivered from their slavery in Egypt and to whom He had given the land of Canaan. God had become so

frustrated, so exasperated with His people that He took them to court. He filed suit against them.

I don't know about you, but I sure would not want to be a defendant in a court of law where God is the plaintiff or prosecutor or judge. Fortunately, by God's grace, through the saving work of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, on our behalf, I don't have to worry about it. Neither do you, if you have put your trust in Christ, if you belong to Him by faith and are living for Him.

Some people mistakenly think God is a cosmic cop who is just waiting to pounce on you with the full force of His righteous wrath the instant you mess up and fall into sin of some kind. He is not. Rather, as the apostle John reminds us, if (or when) we sin, "we have an advocate" – a defense attorney, a great high priest – "who speaks to the Father on our behalf – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 2:1-2).

Because of Jesus and what He has done for us, taking our sin upon Himself and taking our place in His death on the cross, you and I need not live in fear of the judgment of God. You don't need to be afraid that God will file charges against you in His heavenly courtroom. Why? Because in Christ your sins have all been forgiven. *All* your sins are forgiven – past, present, and future. Does this mean we can do all the sinning we want and not give a moment's thought to what God wants? No! As Paul says in Romans 6:1: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" The atoning death of Jesus Christ on your behalf is not a license to live a life of self-indulging, self-pleasing sin. If you think it is, you have badly, perhaps even fatally, misunderstood the meaning of grace.

However, even though as a follower of Christ you don't need to fear being hauled into court by God, if you have any appreciation for the greatness of God's grace and the depth of the riches of His love for you, you will want to live your life in a way that pleases God. You will want to live out the values and virtues that reflect the character of God. You will want to take seriously the prophet's call "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." Not because these are things you must do in order to be saved. No. Micah is not suggesting that this is the way of salvation. Instead, this is the way you and I and all of God's people, as the objects of His saving grace, are to live in response to that grace we have received from God. Makes sense, doesn't it?

Micah 6 begins in the courtroom with God calling the mountains and hills of Israel as witnesses as He presents His charges against the people (6:1-2). The foundations of the earth are summoned to listen to the Lord's case against His people (6:2). God has been unfailingly faithful in His covenant love and kindness to His people, but they have not kept faith with Him. Time and again they have forgotten His faithfulness to them. And they have neglected their covenant promises to Him.

In verses 3-5, the Lord speaks directly to His people. He does not shout at them in anger. He does not belittle them or berate them mercilessly. On the contrary, He speaks tenderly, lovingly, pleading with them in verse 3 to explain what He has done to push them away or to provoke them to rebellion. The people have no answer, for, in truth, God has not burdened

them or treated them unfairly. He has been nothing but loving and generous in all His dealings with them – just as He has been nothing but loving and generous, merciful and gracious in all His dealings with us.

Then, in verses 4-5, the Lord urges the people to remember particular experiences in their history of His mercies and grace. He reminds them first of the Exodus from Egypt, how He delivered them from their slavery and led them to the land He had promised to give them. Second, He reminds them of the leaders He gave them, His servants Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, two brothers and a sister, called, equipped, and empowered by God to lead them out of Egypt, during their 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, and right to the edge of the Promised Land.

Third, He reminds them of how, in their wilderness years, He delivered them from the evil intentions of Balak, king of Moab, who implored Balaam to pronounce a curse against the people of Israel. Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel, but God reversed the curse and caused Balaam to speak blessings on His covenant people (Numbers 22-24). Fourth, the Lord reminds His people of the journey their ancestors made from Shittim to Gilgal on the plains of Jericho, crossing the Jordan River, as they began to take possession of the land of Canaan. God was with them every step of the way.

If they would but remember the Lord's gracious, mighty, righteous acts on their behalf, how could they turn away from Him? How could they reject Him or rebel against Him? But they did.

And what of us? What of sinners like you and me who have been saved by the miracle of His grace? How can we ever forget and turn away? What of this nation, which has been blessed almost beyond measure in ways beyond measure? And yet, we have forgotten the source of our blessings. As a nation, we are increasingly turning our back on God and His ways. We are guilty of what Isaiah prophesied when he said:

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,  
Who put darkness for light and light for darkness,  
Who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.  
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes  
And clever in their own sight.  
(Isaiah 5:20-21)

May God have mercy on us. May God *continue* to have mercy on us. As individuals, as His church in this generation, and as a nation, may God bring us to our senses. May we turn our hearts and minds back to Him. Before it is too late.

In verses 6-8, Micah asks a series of rhetorical questions about the proper way to worship God, as if the people wanted to know what kinds of sacrifices and offerings would satisfy God. They thought, wrongly, that if they fulfilled certain religious obligations, if they performed certain religious duties, if they checked off all the boxes on their “to-do” list of

religious requirements, if they showed up at church now and then and put some money in the offering plate, it was all God wanted from them.

But what God wanted, and what God wants, is not empty ritual. The outward display of religious piety is not what God is after, especially if it masks a heart that is proud or cynical, a heart that is far from God. Would it please God if I brought an entire semi or a plane full of gifts and offerings to present to Him? If I were to bring thousands of rams, and buckets and barrels of olive oil – if I were to bring the finest diamonds from South Africa – would it be enough to please God?

Don't you see, it is not your money, it is not your offerings that God is after. It is not your religious observances that God cares most about. What God wants is *you*. What God wants is your heart. What God wants is your life. What God wants is for you and me to care about and to be devoted to what He cares about.

What does God care about? Micah 6:8 does not give us the Bible's complete answer to this question. There are other passages in the Bible that confirm or amplify the answer given here. Even though it is not the complete answer, it is an answer the church in this generation needs to hear and take to heart.

What does God care about? God cares about justice. Not just justice for you and me when someone treats us unfairly, but justice for those who suffer injustice or exploitation or oppression or abuse of any kind on a daily basis, and who need advocates to come alongside and stand with them and speak up for them and even rescue them from those who mistreat or oppress them. This kind of injustice takes place everywhere, even if we don't see it. What the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail* more than 50 years ago is true: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." God cares about justice and calls us to care about justice, too – to work for justice for others and to treat everyone fairly.

God cares about mercy, too. Micah uses the Hebrew word *hesed* or *chesed* here, a word used around 250 times in the Old Testament and yet, as one renowned Old Testament scholar, Walter Kaiser, has said, it is difficult to render by a single English term. *Hesed* has to do with mercy, kindness, loyalty in love, faithfulness, and more. Notice that a commitment to doing justice does not mean there is no place for mercy. We must always make room for mercy, for where there is no mercy, there is no hope for any of us.

God also cares about the posture of our hearts toward Him. I think that is what Micah means when he says that we are to "walk humbly with ... God." To walk humbly with God is to recognize that God is God and you are not, and to live moment by moment by faith in Him, submitting gladly to His sovereign and gracious rule.

What does God want from you and me? With hearts that have been transformed by His grace, with hearts that are being transformed by His grace, He wants us to serve His purposes in this world by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with Him.

I'm going to stop here for today. Come back next Sunday and we will consider in more specifics what it means to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

May we reflect these qualities in our lives more and more, to the praise and glory of God. Lord, let it be so. Amen.