

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 2, 2014

WHAT GOD WANTS
(Part 2)

Amos 5:18-24

Last Sunday, we began to think together about our calling as God's people, a calling expressed in Micah 6:8, where the prophet says:

(The LORD) has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, to love mercy,
and to walk humbly with your God?

Timeless in its relevance, this is a Bible verse that tells us unmistakably what God cares about. It is a good verse to commit to memory.

I'm currently reading Timothy Keller's book, *Generous Justice* (subtitled *How God's Grace Makes Us Just*), which I commend to you heartily. I think it is likely to increase or even revolutionize your understanding of what justice truly looks like and what it involves from a biblical perspective. In the first chapter, Keller points out that "Micah 6:8 is a summary of how God wants us to live." He continues:

"To walk humbly with God is to know Him intimately and to be attentive to what He desires and loves. And what does that consist of? The text says to 'do justice and love mercy,' which seem at first glance to be two different things, but they are not. The term for 'mercy' is the Hebrew word *chesedh*, God's unconditional grace and compassion." (I spoke briefly about *chesedh* last Sunday.)

"The word for 'justice' is the Hebrew term *mishpat*. 'In Micah 6:8,' quoting biblical scholar Bruce Waltke, Keller continues, '*mishpat* puts the emphasis on the action [while] *chesedh* puts it on the attitude [or motive] behind the action.'

"To walk with God, then," Keller says, "we must do justice, out of merciful love."

Keller goes on to point out that the word *mishpat* in its different forms is used more than 200 times in the Old Testament. "Its most basic meaning," he says, "is to treat people equitably." At its most elementary level, the essence of justice is simply treating people fairly. Treating *all* people fairly, whether rich or poor, strong or weak, young or old, male or female, regardless of race, religion, language, or national origin. "*Mishpat*," Keller writes, "means acquitting or punishing every person on the merits of the case, regardless of race or social status. Anyone who does the same wrong should be given the same penalty. But," he continues, "*mishpat* means more than just the punishment of wrongdoing. It also means to give people their rights.... *Mishpat*, then, is giving people what they are due, whether punishment or protection or care" (Keller, *Generous Justice*, 3-4).

A bit later, Keller acknowledges that you may have valid reasons to be concerned when you hear some people talk about “doing justice.” Sometimes the term may be just a slogan used to recruit people to jump on some political bandwagon. I confess that I am often suspicious of the motives or political agendas behind certain calls for “social justice.” In some cases I may be too suspicious; in others, not suspicious enough. Some of you may have similar suspicions. “Nevertheless,” says Keller, “if you are trying to live a life in accordance with the Bible, the concept and call to justice are inescapable. We do justice when we give all human beings their due as creations of God. Doing justice includes not only the righting of wrongs, but” – listen to this! – “generosity and social concern, especially toward the poor and vulnerable” (*Generous Justice*, 18).

To do justice involves righting wrongs, punishing wrongdoing, and protecting the rights of all people. But biblical justice also includes a genuine concern for the needs and welfare of those who are poor, underprivileged, and powerless in society – a concern that expresses itself in a life marked by generosity, compassion, and loving social action on behalf of those who are weak or needy or oppressed.

Though justice and grace, in one sense, are polar opposites, they are not completely disconnected from one another. Justice involves giving people exactly what they deserve, whether good or bad. Grace involves giving (or receiving) benefits that are not deserved. It comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. It is undeserved, unmerited favor. To add mercy into the mix, mercy is withholding the penalty or punishment one deserves. As David says in Psalm 103:10, mercy is God not treating us as our sins deserve, nor repaying us according to our iniquities.

The natural inclination of our hearts is to want justice when we are the ones who have been wronged, but to desire (and even plead for) mercy when we have wronged someone or violated the law. When you have experienced the mercy and grace of God in salvation, however, the impact of that mercy and grace in your life, will lead – *should* lead – to a life of compassionate concern for the welfare and just treatment of all people, but especially for those caught in the web of poverty and fear and hopelessness. Why? Because the Bible makes it abundantly clear that God has a special concern for the poor, the weak, and the downtrodden.

The problem is, it doesn’t always seem to work out this way in real life. Too often, there is a disconnect between our professions of faith in Christ and a passionate, compassionate commitment to justice for the have-nots and those who are oppressed or abused in the world today. Sometimes it is because the injustice and oppression are hidden from us, and we just don’t see it. We don’t see the thousands of girls and young women caught in the seedy web of sex trafficking, or the millions of men and women, boys and girls, around the world trapped in modern-day forms of slavery.

Sometimes we don’t see it because we choose not to see it – because if we see it, we may also come to see that we might be complicit in it, in one way or another. If we see it, we may also be confronted with our responsibility to do something about it in Jesus’ name. We might be compelled to get involved. Or even to change our lifestyle in some way so that, in our

shopping habits, for example, we do not aid and abet the exploitation of workers who do not receive a fair wage for their labor. Or we may be compelled to come to the aid or defense of someone seeking just and fair treatment for himself or herself, but who lacks the resources, connections, or leverage to succeed against someone with much greater power to affect the outcome.

The life-changing experience of God's saving grace and mercy should lead us to seek fair treatment for all people – people who are, after all, created in the image of God and loved by Him. It should, but it doesn't always work out that way in the world today. Nor did it always work out that way in the time of Micah and Amos in the 8th century B. C. either. Definitely not in the lives of many, many people who were quite religious on the outside, but their hearts were far from God. And God was really ticked about it.

In Micah 6, in response to God's covenant lawsuit against them, the people of Israel wanted to know what kind of offerings God wanted from them. Did God want the usual burnt offerings? Yearling calves? If that weren't enough, would God be satisfied with the offering of thousands – *thousands* – of rams, or *ten thousand* barrels of oil, flowing like a mighty river? What would it take to satisfy God? Did He want from each one their most cherished possession? Did He want them to sacrifice their firstborn children to Him? They did not know that the day would come when God Himself would give His own Son, who would offer up His life on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our transgressions, yours and mine, shedding His own blood for the sin of our souls.

But, you see, it wasn't their sacrifices or offerings that God wanted, especially when God could plainly see that their hearts were not in it. They didn't give a hoot what God cared about. Their worship was just a way of trying to use God for their own purposes, as if you can really get away with "using" God in the long run. It wasn't their offerings or religious rituals that God wanted. God wanted their hearts. He wanted them to cultivate a heart like His. Since the Lord loves justice (Psalm 11:7), He wanted – and wants – His people to love justice and to live justly. Since the Lord is full of mercy and loving kindness, He wanted – and wants – His people to imitate Him by showing mercy and kindness to others. What God wanted was for His covenant people to walk humbly with Him, to surrender willingly to His gracious and sovereign rule in their lives, and to live lives of justice, mercy, and compassion for others.

When you turn to Amos, it is intuitively obvious to even the most casual observer that God is not pleased with His people. The Book of Amos begins with the announcement that "the LORD roars [like a lion] from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem" (1:2) in judgment against His people. In the verses we read from Amos 5, you can feel the depth of anger in God's voice and hear how personally He takes the hypocrisy of their worship, combined with their systematic corruption of justice and oppression of the poor. Six times, beginning in verse 21, God uses the first-person pronoun:

"I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.
... I will not accept (your burnt offerings and grain offerings).

... I will have no regard for (your choice fellowship offerings).
 ... I will not listen to (the noise of your songs).”

In effect, the Lord is saying to Israel: “Your religious performances make me sick. I’ve had all I can take of it.”

Amos, Micah, and other prophets, too, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah, all leveled the charge that, even though the people regularly attended worship, followed the prescribed rituals and regulations of the Jewish religion, and took pride in their special status as God’s people and in their possession of God’s law, they still systematically took advantage of those who were poor and powerless. This showed that all their religious activities, all the things they did to show how morally and spiritually upstanding they were, were offensive, deeply offensive, to God. He saw right through it. (Paragraph adapted from Keller, *Generous Justice*, 49-50).

Instead of all their offerings and public displays of religion, what did God want? What *does* God want? Verse 24 tells it straight:

But let justice roll down like water,
 and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In *The Message* paraphrase of verse 24, the Lord says:

Do you know what I want?
 I want justice – oceans of it.
 I want fairness – rivers of it.
 That’s what I want.

The message here is not that God doesn’t care about our worship practices or the gifts and offerings we bring to Him. He *does* care. Worship is not a non-essential in the life of a Christian. The particular worship style you prefer is a non-essential. We don’t all have to like the same style of music or liturgy. But the call to worship – to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24), to love and worship God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength (Mark 12:30) – is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is anything but non-essential.

God cares about your worship, because worship is what you were made for. The primary purpose of your life, in the famous words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, is “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” You were made to worship God. Worship involves recognizing and affirming the “worth-ship” of God, and giving Him the glory, honor, praise, and devotion that rightly belong to Him.

What we learn from the prophets of the Old Testament, and from Jesus Himself in the New Testament, is that true worship is not just going through prescribed outward motions, taking part in religious observances, or presenting impressive-looking offerings to God. True worship comes from the heart. True worship comes from a heart that has been touched by

God's mercy and changed by God's grace. And true worship spills out into a life that cares about what God cares about, a life committed to the things to which God is committed – a life of humility, generous justice, mercy, and loving kindness.

Jesus didn't criticize the Pharisees for their diligence in giving a tenth of everything, even their spices – mint, dill, and cumin – to the Lord. But He did criticize them in the strongest terms for neglecting what He called “the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.” These they should have practiced, Jesus said, without neglecting the former (Matthew 23:23). Do you hear what Jesus is saying?

As usual, there is much, much more to glean from the riches of God's Word on these matters. I conclude today with this thought from David Hubbard on the connection between worship that pleases God and a life of justice and mercy:

“Those who seek to adore the Lord's name must ... honor the Lord's character in deed as well as word. Concern for the rights and welfare of all God's people flows, like a mighty river, from God's own heart. Whoever would truly serve Him must go with that flow” (Hubbard, *Joel & Amos*, 183).

Let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Let it flow, people of Faith. Let it flow. And go with the flow.

Lord, let it be so in us, now and always, to the glory of Your name. Amen.