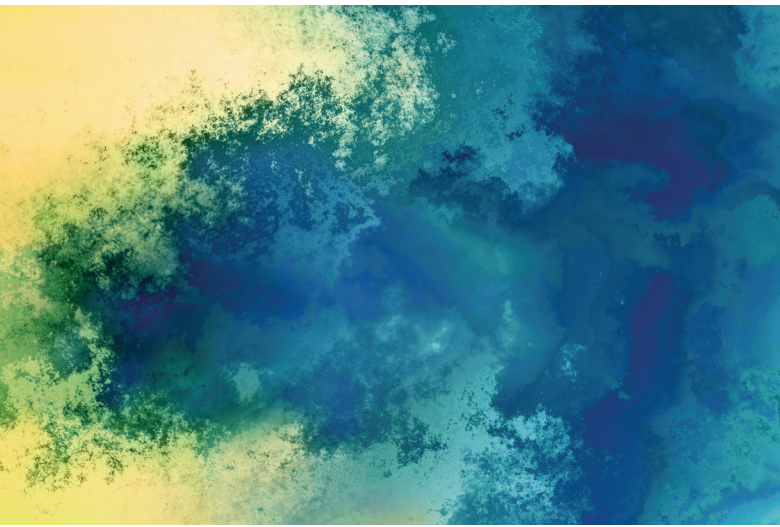
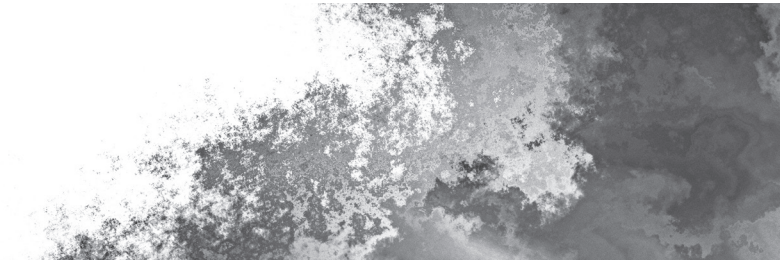
Discovery Series®

Living Justly, Loving Mercy

A Biblical Response to Our Broken World



Our Daily Bread Ministries



introduction

Living Justly, Loving Mercy

A Biblical Response to Our Broken World

Justice and mercy can seem like opposing ideas. Justice requires the recompense for wrongs done, the wrongdoer to "pay the price" or make restitution in some way. It is most often associated with punishment for a crime done. It is meted out, or done to, the offender.

Mercy on the other hand, is almost the antithesis of justice. It is the withholding of the deserved punishment for a crime or offense. Mercy is almost the removal of the need for

justice, that there is no need to address the wrong that has been committed.

Paradoxically, we all want mercy for ourselves and to see justice in the world. But what if each of those actually starts with us? What if justice begins well before the criminal system? What if mercy is more than just withholding punishment? By understanding those ideas from God's view, we begin to see that justice has failed if it relies on the courts, and mercy is thin if it requires a wrong to be exercised.

Our Daily Bread Ministries

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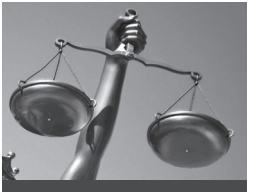
Jesus and Lady Justice

Since the early days of the Roman empire, artistic renderings of the goddess Iustitia (Latin for justice) have graced the public square. Known also as Lady Justice, she's depicted holding a balance scale in one hand and a sword in the other. Caesar Augustus (63 BC–AD 14) gave her to his empire to symbolize the honor, moral spirit, and authority of rule by law.

A providential convergence, however, infused the emperor's legacy with an unexpected significance. He would be remembered far more for his role in the birth of Jesus than for his patronage of Lady

Justice. The Son that Augustus unwittingly brought to Bethlehem would bring fullness of meaning to the kind of justice that does right by those who do wrong.

In our own day theologian and philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff has written and spoken at length about a kind of justice that goes beyond the prosecution of wrongs. Surveying the literature on the subject, he noticed that justice has come to be understood primarily in terms of the consequence and punishment for wrongs done, rather than as a first response to human need. The result, he observed, is that we tend to consider love and justice as necessary opposites—like defense and prosecution in a court of law. Love defends. Justice accuses.



We tend to consider love and justice as necessary opposites. Love defends. Justice accuses.

Understanding how inclined we are to see justice in such a light, Wolterstorff calls attention to what he overlooked until fairly late in life. When Jesus told us that love for God and neighbor is the greatest of laws, he was doing more than giving us quotes without a context. Wolterstorff noticed that when Moses said to "love your neighbor as yourself" (LEVITICUS 19:18), he was summing up the kind of everyday care and concern that does justice to all

members of a community. In context, Moses was saying things like:

- *Respect those who brought you into the world and gave you life* (19:1–8)
- *Think of the poor and foreigner when making a profit from your work* (19:9)
- *Don't cheat, deceive, or steal from those who depend on you to be honest* (19:11–13)
- *Don't denigrate or add to the pain of those already disadvantaged. Keep in mind that the Lord is watching all who belong to him, even those who appear to have been shortchanged by the King of heaven* (19:14)
- *Do what it takes to value another person's life in a way that not only does justice to their rights, but also to the Lord himself* (19:2–4, 10–18).

Wolterstorff notes that such examples of justice can be summed up, in short, love your neighbor as yourself. In other words, God taught his people to see love in justice and justice in love. By treating others as we want to be treated, we can avoid the pain that ends up in the conflict of court, blood feuds, or war.

Yet this is also a kind of justice that, too often, was glaringly absent in the story of God's people. Not until Jesus does the story of the Bible offer an unflawed example of One who personifies what it means to do justice to one another in love.

For Jesus, the price of caring about others was the mark of the kingdom of God. Early in his three years of public life, all eyes were on him as took his place before his local synagogue. At that time, he claimed to have come in fulfillment of the words of Isaiah to bring help and rescue to the oppressed. Yet when he reminded them from their own Scriptures that God has a special care for those outside of Israel, the crowd turned into a mob that chased him out of town with thoughts of killing him.

Jesus accomplished all this in the course of doing right by the heart of his Father. And he did it while simultaneously seeking to do justice to the desperate needs of vulnerable people.

But the city fathers and religious teachers of the Law didn't buy it. Instead of dancing in the streets when they saw Jesus bringing help and advocating for those suffering oppression, they perceived Jesus to be a threat to the faith and well-being of the nation. Instead of praising God for sending relief to the blind, the leper, the poor, and even those mourning lost loved ones, legal experts with a reputation for defending the Law of Moses resented, feared, hated, and—in the end—crucified him.

What if Lady Justice had been a real person in the crowd and saw Jesus with her own eyes? Would it have ended differently if Jesus's countrymen and Jerusalem's city fathers had known the heart of their God and the spirit of the laws entrusted to them? Would she have loved him? Imagine her listening to Jesus in the synagogue or in one of the crowds

that saw him healing the weak and siding with the oppressed. Picture him using his Sermon on the Mount to describe what it means to care not only for family and friends but also enemies. Imagine what she might have thought standing with the women friends of Jesus at the foot of his cross. Would she join them in sobbing the loss of a man who seemed to understand her own heart for the weak, the hurting, and those who needed an advocate?

If the honored Lady had been more than an idea, would she have understood why Jesus didn't resist the lies of his accusers, the anger of the mob, and the cruelty of his crucifixion? Would she have understood that this is what it took for him to do justice to our deepest needs—and to do right by the enemy who in the garden of Eden had planted seeds of doubt about the goodness of our God? (GENESIS 3:15).

In concept, the image of Lady Justice is good and beautiful symbolism. But ideal as she is, she's just an idea. Like all of the good laws and thoughts written by the finger of God into the stone tablets of Moses, she can't help those who have broken the law or assure that courts duty-bound to uphold the law be faithful to their own calling.

By contrast, Jesus personifies the kind of justice that gives fullness of meaning to the truth, impartiality, and moral authority that the art of a noble statue symbolizes. While mirroring the heart of his Father, he showed us what it means to show love by justice, and justice by love. Instead of leaving us with the impression that we do right by

wrongdoers only by punishing them, he showed us his desire to turn oppressors into examples and advocates. By showing the heart and spirit of the law he demonstrated that restorative justice is far more than punishment. Justice that does right by everyone works to restore relationships with a compassionate God. He longs to show mercy and forgiveness, while using wise and loving consequences when needed for the good of all (Exodus 34:5–7).

—*Mart DeHaan*

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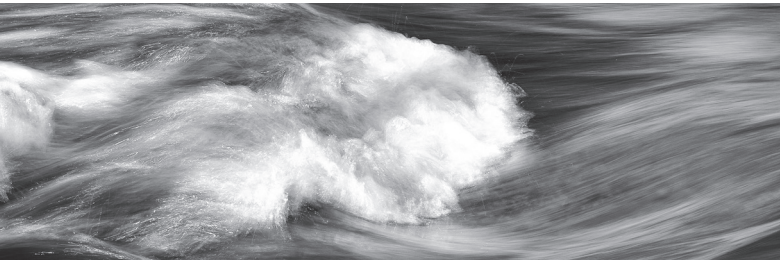

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A Torrent of Justice

Sometimes we end up getting more than we bargained for. And for both the prophet and the recipients of the prophecy in the book of Amos, that possibility proved far too real. Amos was a farmer and led a simple life. Apart from herding animals, he also filled his time by piercing the figs of sycamore trees—a process that allowed them to ripen quicker and more fully (Amos 7:14–15). It wasn't a glamorous lifestyle, and the man certainly didn't anticipate a future where God would call him to condemn his brothers and sisters in Israel.

It started off easy enough. The opening chapters of Amos contain words of condemnation that

surely tasted sweet in the ears of Amos's original hearers. The people of the northern tribes had suffered at the whims of surrounding nations and built up quite the animosity against them. And reading through chapters one and two of Amos, it's easy to see why.

In a repeated refrain ("I will not relent from punishing . . . for three crimes, even four"), Yahweh, the God of Israel and commander of heaven's armies declares judgment against the surrounding nations. The word translated "crimes" or "trespasses" is far more serious than a simple speeding ticket, for instance. Instead, it pulls in the weight of horrific atrocities dealt against humanity.

The Israelites despised their neighbors, and it's not hard to see why. The Syrians (represented in Amos 1:3–5 as Damascus) had brutally conquered the territories of the three northern tribes of Gad, Reuben, and Manasseh that sat on the far side of the Jordan River (2 KINGS 10:32–33). It was a beating of national proportions, as the Syrians sold the displaced Israelites into slavery with the help of the Philistines, the city-state of Tyre, the Ammonites, and the Edomites.

It left Israel smarting and furious. So, when Amos the fig-nipping shepherd stood up in front of the people and announced the roaring voice of Yahweh against those nations, everyone's ears perked up. *Of course* they wanted to hear what the God of Jacob was about to do to those nations. They wanted justice for the violence done to their people.

And it *was* violence. The deeds of Damascus, Philistia, Tyre, Edom, and Ammon against the citizens of the northern tribes were horrific. From the pulverization of the tribes in Gilead by the Syrians to the enslavement of Israelites by the Philistines and Tyre and the murder of pregnant women and their infants by the Ammonites, it's easy to sympathize with Israel's desire to see justice done.

Amos's listeners looked on the deeds of pagan people and condemned them for violating human dignity, disregarding human life, and inflicting suffering on the people of God. It's not a far cry from what Christians see in the world today. We don't have to look hard to find what appear to be giant targets on the backs of Christians all around the globe.

And so we find a bit of camaraderie with Amos's original audience. The God who crushed Egypt doesn't seem to take lightly the horrific actions of the unbelieving world when they're leveled against the people of God. There's a kind of sweet satisfaction in knowing that God himself will stamp out the injustices the people of God have suffered.

But Amos doesn't stop there. His prophetic message circles closer to home in the second chapter. There, he addresses Moab—which was a sister-nation to Israel—condemning her for violating the dead of Edom (Amos 2:1–3). Then Amos turns to Judah—Israel's literal other half—in the south. Suddenly, the type of grievances shifts:

"I will not relent from punishing Judah
for three crimes, even four,
because they have rejected the instruction of the LORD
and have not kept his statutes.
The lies that their ancestors followed
have led them astray.

Therefore, I will send fire against Judah,
and it will consume the citadels of Jerusalem"
(AMOS 2:4–5 CSB).

Gone are the accusations of inhumane treatment. Gone are the atrocities of murder and violence. Instead, Amos condemns Judah for having failed to maintain her covenant commitments to God. Still, Israel rejoiced. Sure, it was a little closer to home than they might have liked, but at least the majority of those living in the northern tribes were still honoring the requirements of the law—offering sacrifices and bringing in the tithes. Surely they were better than Judah. Surely.

Again, we find something we can relate to with Israel. The news brings stories every day of some church or denomination or celebrity Christian embroiled in scandal. It's not hard to put ourselves in Israel's shoes, *tsk-tsk*-ing our Christian neighbors for their failure to remain true to God. But in doing so we stray too close to the fire.

Like a master storyteller, Amos flips the sword of judgment back on his listeners in the second half of chapter two. Each of the nations he's condemned so far moved the pointed finger of God's judgment

progressively closer to home, and now he's turned his attention to Israel. But like Judah, he doesn't condemn Israel for violence or slavery or murder. He condemns them for how they treat the poor.

It's a huge shift in tone, and we'd be forgiven for picturing a baffled audience. *That's* his complaint against Israel? All the surrounding nations are guilty of murder and enslavement and God picks a fight with Israel over how they treat the *poor*? But it's more than just that. In each of God's accusations, Israel lies guilty of abusing the poor and helpless in pursuit of their own self-indulgence. And in doing so, they violate their very relationship with him.

Amos 2:6–8 outlines it well: They'd sell out a poor person for a few pieces of silver or a pair of sandals. They'd abuse a girl for the perverse delights of both a father and a son. They'd visit pagan temple prostitutes, lying on the clothes they took from an impoverished person in a lopsided deal. They'd leverage the legal system to get themselves drunk, and do it in the presence of God in his temple.

Throughout chapters three and four, Amos lays out God's case against Israel. Yahweh delivered Israel from Egypt and conquered the pagan nations of Canaan before them. And because of their refusal to love him for his kindness, he warned them with prophets and calamities. He gave them the law. He had sent the very nations the Israelites rejoiced to hear condemned to wake the people up.

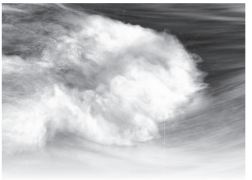
Instead of repenting, Israel exploited the poor and the needy and the underprivileged among them to

acquire wealth, build expensive vacation homes, and fatten themselves up with the choicest foods (Amos 3:15; 4:1; 5:11). The people of Israel thought themselves safe; they were "okay" with God because they still did all the right things associated with "worship." They brought freewill offerings, tithes, thanksgiving offerings, and sacrifices to God at the temple, while at home they exploited the needy for their own gain.

And for that injustice, Israel would suffer the wrath of God. The people of Israel had longed for the God's judgment because they thought it would mean an end to their political enemies and to the atrocities of the pagan world. But the truth of the matter is it would bring their own destruction too.

In chapter five, we have one of the most-quoted and memorable lines of the entire book, one that Martin Luther King Jr. highlighted as the words of an ardent pursuer of justice ("Letter from Birmingham Jail"). After throwing out Israel's worshipfulness, Yahweh demands through Amos: "But let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream" (Amos 5:24 CSB).

Isolated from the context of the book, the words read poetically—almost like a salve to paste over the hurts we see in the world. But the context of Amos makes clear that God's demands for justice are far from a babbling brook. In chapter five, Yahweh rejects all of Israel's worship. All of their services, their offerings, and their music (vv. 21–23). He wants none of it, because the people who brought it to his temple turned around and rejected justice for the



As God's people, we're called into a relationship with God that carries two demands: love for him and love for each other.

poor, the disenfranchised, and the underprivileged.

We have to understand that justice as Israel defined it meant vengeance against the pagan world for violating humanity. But justice as *God* defines it meant bringing Israel back into alignment with his covenantal expectations. And at the center of that realignment was how Israel viewed her own poor.

Like Israel, we have good reason to want God to do something about the evil that we see in the world.

But the warnings of Amos come with a far more nuanced picture of justice than we might think or even want. God's contention with Israel revolved around the people's failure to maintain faithfulness in their covenant relationship with him. His issue wasn't with their worship—they maintained the demands of the temple well, bringing tithes, sacrifices, and worship near-daily. His issue was with the second part of the great commandment—loving their neighbor (LEVITICUS 19:18).

As God's people, we're called into a relationship with God that carries two demands: love for him and love for each other. Jesus remarked to his disciples that the world would recognize his followers not for

their religiosity or even their advocacy, but for their love for fellow believers (JOHN 13:35).

If we're failing in the church to care for the needs of our fellow brothers and sisters, if we're failing to obtain justice for them based on their skin color, yearly income, or political affiliation, if we're overlooking the suffering of other Christians to "just preach the gospel," if we're propping up celebrities to "save face" even though they abused their power to molest women, we run afoul of Amos's condemnation.

We cannot have a right relationship with God if we're simultaneously oppressing, ignoring, or silencing our sisters and brothers who deserve justice. And when the justice of God does indeed roll down like water, we'll find ourselves not safe on the shore, but in the midst of the torrent.

—Jed Ostoich

three

The Mercy of God

Pastor and author Robert Gelinas points out in his book *The Mercy Prayer* that there is one prayer prayed more often than any other in the Bible: "Lord, have mercy." This prayer, known in liturgical churches as the Kyrie Eleison, prompted Gelinas to pen a "mercy prayer" of his own:

For those who sin and those who suffer,
For those who suffer because of sin.
For those who sin to alleviate their suffering,
Lord, have mercy on us.

What is the mercy of God for which we pray? First of all, mercy seems to be one of the truly defining

characteristics of God in the Scriptures. In God's own self-description given to Moses on Mount Sinai, we read:

> *Then the* LORD *passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The* LORD*, the* LORD *God, compassionate and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in faithfulness and truth . . . .* (EXODUS 34:6 NASB)

The Lord . . . merciful. This powerful virtue is worthy of our consideration, as it, in a sense, pictures so much of God's dealings with his wayward and rebellious creation.

So, then, what is the mercy of God?

The *Dictionary of Bible Themes* echoes Gelinas's prayer and its important focus on the problem of sin, defining mercy as: "A quality of compassion, especially as expressed in God's forgiveness of human sin. Scripture stresses God's forbearance towards sinners. In his mercy, God shields sinners from what they deserve and gives gifts that they do not deserve."

Mercy seems to be one of the truly defining characteristics of God in the Scriptures.

The last sentence of that definition is especially vital because it describes a two-sided mercy that both shields and gives. The "giving" side of mercy is similar to the New Testament concept of grace, wherein God gives us

the love, forgiveness, restoration, and relationship we do not deserve and could never earn.

Perhaps this is why the writer of the letter to the Hebrews used God's mercy (and grace) as a motivator for our prayers:

> *Therefore let's approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace for help at the time of our need.* (HEBREWS 4:16 NASB)

The other side of the definition of mercy, however, seems to be more the focus of the Scriptures: "God shields sinners from what we deserve." Very early in my faith journey I heard it said that grace is getting what we *don't* deserve while mercy is *not getting* what we *do* deserve. God's mercy restrains judgment. One example of this restraining mercy of God is seen in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, written by the prophet Jeremiah during a time of national crisis.

> *Through the LORD's mercies we are not consumed,*
> *Because His compassions fail not.*
> *They are new every morning;*
> *Great is Your faithfulness.* (LAMENTATIONS 3:22–23 NKJV)

Jeremiah's lamentations were written at a time when the southern kingdom of Judah, having drifted far from God and embracing the gods of the nations, was undergoing a national season of divine discipline—but Jeremiah still glimpsed reason for hope. He saw the mercy of God as limiting the extent of that discipline so they "are not consumed" (v. 22).

There, mercy is clearly described as holding back consequences.

Little wonder then that David in many of his lament psalms appeals to God for his mercy (PSALMS 4:1; 6:2, 9; 25:6; 28:2, AND MANY MORE). Though described as a man after God's heart (1 SAMUEL 13:14), David was nevertheless a deeply flawed and broken person who experienced tragic and painful consequences for his sins. Even for the great king and psalmist, mercy was the response from God that he most longed for.

Additionally, Paul's New Testament letter to Titus saw God's mercy as integral to our salvation as he wrote:

> *But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we did in righteousness, but in accordance with His mercy.* (TITUS 3:4–5 NASB)

Again, this statement about our spiritual rescue contains both sides of the coin of God's character. Salvation is all of grace because it is "not on the basis of deeds which we did in righteousness" but it is out of his mercy to spare us from the judgment our sin deserves. This caused the apostle Peter to exult:

> *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.* (1 PETER 1:3 NASB)

"To His great mercy" is a phrase that should stir us to respond to him with our whole hearts. So then,

how are we to respond to the God who deals with us in mercy, rather than giving us what we deserve? A few biblical challenges will be helpful here:

- We can respond to God's mercy by yielding our lives to him for his work and service: *"Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship."* (ROMANS 12:1 NASB)
- We can bless and praise God for his mercies: *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort."* (2 CORINTHIANS 1:3 NASB)
- We can convey God's mercy to others by reflecting his heart and spirit: *"Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."* (LUKE 6:36 NASB)

In the concluding psalm of Book Two of the Psalms, Ethan the Ezrahite offers us a response that could be as constant as our breathing. He wrote:

> *I will sing of the mercies of the LORD forever;*
> *With my mouth will I make known Your faithfulness to all generations.* (PSALM 89:1 NKJV)

Like Jeremiah in Lamentations, Ethan links together God's wonderful mercy and his great faithfulness. God's mercy prevents us from being consumed by the consequences of our wrongdoings and wrong choices, giving us much reason for praise and much reason for worship. We do well to

remember that God's mercy is not merely an element of our past conversion. It is to be a significant part of our ongoing walk of faith so that in moments of failure and loss, despair and grief, shame and guilt, we can go to the Father of mercies and pray for ourselves and for those around us:

For those who sin and those who suffer,
For those who suffer because of sin.
For those who sin to alleviate their suffering,
Lord, have mercy on us.

—Bill Crowder

four

God's Expectations

Life is full of expectations, from ourselves, of ourselves, from others, and on others. We all have them, and from time to time we find ourselves bearing their weight. Some are fair, some unfair. Others feel as though ultimate success follows behind them.

Perhaps you rise to the challenge no matter how big or small the expectation is, enjoying the task each one presents. Or perhaps expectation feels like it is lurking around every corner, waiting to pounce on you, tear you open, and reveal how far short you have fallen (can you guess how I relate to expectation?). One thing is universally agreed on about expectation: regardless of size, significance, or how we respond, expectations are best when they are clear and well communicated. No surprises. We know when we have succeeded and when we have failed.

Our relationships are subject to expectations, whether we recognize their impact or not. Micah in one of his more recognized passages reminds the people of God of the expectations God has of them. We do well to hear his voice too:

> *He has shown 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.* (MICAH 6:8 NIV)

These are the requirements, the expectations, of God for his people. With the dual elements of living for God and living with others, this is Micah's predictive version of Jesus's New Testament summary of the entirety of the law and prophets. What God expects has to do equally with how we relate to him and to each other.

However, unlike Jesus, Micah wasn't responding to a direct theological question. Not only is there so much packed into this single verse—ideas of what is justice, mercy, and walking humbly with God—but there is the glaring fact that this is in chapter six (of seven) of Micah's message to Judah. Loaded with meaning on its own, its weight will slide off us if we only hear these inspiring words.

Micah was no different than any of the prophets. He took God's word to a people far from him—though they may not have known it. They, perhaps like us, enjoyed the trappings of a religion devoted to God. But again, perhaps like us and certainly like Isaiah's hearers, their hearts were far from him.

The northern tribes of Israel had been taken into captivity long before Micah delivers his message of both warning and hope to the people of Judah. His message begins with the general language of wrongs, i.e. "transgression" and "sin" in chapter 1 and moves to more specific descriptions of greed and injustice in chapters 2 and beyond. But interspersed with these accusations and condemnations are visions of a hopeful future when struggle and conflict melt into peace (4:3) and the scattered are regathered (4:6–8).

As the message moves into chapter 6, the accusations and condemnations (along with words of hope) evolve into formal charges, and the text dissolves into a courtroom scene.

In an exchange where Micah's voice delivers the words of God as the plaintiff, the people as the defendants, and his own as the intermediary, we culminate with the utterance of God's expectations for his people.

In reply to the unstated complaint that God has not acted on behalf of or for the good of the people, God asks how he has done this. This question must be read with a sense of irony because what follows is anything but burdensome. *Did I burden you when I brought you out of slavery?* (Imagine bringing them from an existence of burden to then be accused of burdening them!) *Was it too much for you when I gave you leaders to help you along the way? Was it over the top when I caused Balaam to pronounce blessings on you, despite the fact that he was hired by Balak to do just the opposite? Or perhaps it was all the things I did for you as you journeyed*

to Gilgal, experiencing my provision and watching your enemies fall before you?

God catalogs a selection, just a sampling, of his miraculous rescues and provisions for the people. The implication is that Judah has no grounds to complain against God. Certainly, God is not whining, but it would be a mistake to read God's question and reply as coming from a disconnected stoic. God is pictured here as being moved to sadness, frustration, and anger by the actions and attitudes of his people.

But there's a glaring fact about these events: all of these actions were drawn from the cold waters of the deep well of Israel's past. These saving acts and incredible miracles were generations ago—miracles witnessed by those who now rest comfortably in Abraham's bosom. These acts occurred long before the people to whom Micah was preaching were born. They were God's acts for their ancestors, taking place lifetimes earlier, and all related to bringing them out of Egypt and establishing them in their own land. They relate directly to the Exodus, the formative event of the Jewish nation. Yet these are the events God resurrects to prove his care, provision, and faithfulness for them.

Before we can examine the directives of justice, mercy, and humility, this concept of pointing to history to inform the present asks us to pause and reflect, to ponder what this might mean for present-day people of God. God points to the defining act of deliverance as overwhelming evidence of his loyalty and protection. God grasps history, stretches it through time, and intends it to inform and shape our current perceptions.

For the Jewish people of Micah's day, it was the Exodus, the events of the wilderness, and entry into the Promised Land. For Jesus-followers, our exodus is the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. Jesus is the defining moment of God's care and provision for us. It is the moment, the event to which God points and says, *see how I have loved you.*

In the courtroom of Micah 6, the defendants respond to God's evidence of loving concern and provision. In an increasingly grandiose list, they want to know what it is that the Lord desires. What will win his favor and turn his eyes upon their plight? What will appease the Lord? They were no strangers to the demands of the temple system—what sacrifice would be enough to bring the Lord's blessing to the people? What could avert the judgment foretold?

What shall we bring to the Lord?

It is, fundamentally, the wrong question.

Micah booms his interruption into what has become a near blasphemous inquiry into beseeching for the Lord's favor, his memorable answer both mocking and chastising.

God has no desire for or need of sacrifice. He does not want you to bring anything to him. You ask what he wants? He has shown you what is good. What does he expect? Pursue justice, show mercy, walk humbly with him!

God wants us and our lives. He wants you to live in a certain way in relation to him and to others. What does your God expect? He expects that our lives will be lived looking out and looking up.

Generalities are easy enough; broad principles

comfortably blanket our minds and spirits. But what do these things look like? It is one thing to accept that idea that we need to live justly and love mercy. How do we actually do that?

Just under the surface lies a tension in these ideas, especially in their modern Western conceptions. Justice and the justice system provide the punishment, the recompense, for someone who has committed a crime. Mercy, on the other hand, is not giving the punishment deserved for a person's actions. These two are seeming antonyms of each other. This is the problem with reading Micah and thinking that he is speaking directly to us. *Justice* is a good translation; it captures the meaning of God's desire. The problem is that it is far too easy to import our practice of justice into our interpretation and application. And the court system is not what God is referring to. There is a clue to our understanding in the text.

From Micah, and for the Jewish concept, justice is not simply a principle to be carried out in response to certain actions. Justice starts far before the court system is involved. Some translations render this phrase as "live justly." "Live" is the key to both understanding and living by this first principle. Justice describes right relationships between people. Justice is honest business practices, fair policies, and *justice* in social dynamics. This is living in mutual respect of one another, particularly within the covenant community of God's people.

The guidelines for living with this view of each other were outlined for the people in the book of Exodus

(SEE CHAPTERS 20–23). Remember Micah's words: "He has shown you . . . what is good"). "Such instructions included protection for foreigners, the poor, slaves, orphans, and widows, who could easily be wronged or taken advantage of by others," says Gary Smith in the *NIV Application Commentary*.[1] In this way, justice for Micah and the people of Judah would precede and possibly nullify the need for justice in the judicial sense.

Love mercy. As followers of Jesus, we understand that it is only by the grace and mercy of God that we are saved. We naturally love mercy, especially when we are the objects of that mercy. But as with justice, there is more to mercy than what is immediately apparent or what is connected to our current conception.

Mercy is a translation of the Hebrew word *hesed*. That recognizable word most often used to describe God in his covenant loyalty to the people of Israel. It is his commitment to them, to be their God and to act in accordance to the terms of the covenant.

Here though, God is urging his people to love *hesed* themselves—not his *hesed* toward them, but to live *hesed* toward each other. While this may sometimes require them to show mercy to a person in distress (see the story of the good Samaritan), the nature of *hesed* as covenant loyalty will lead to keeping the requirements of the covenant—caring for the poor, tithing, worshiping, good treatment of slaves and foreigners—toward God and toward each other.

Finally, and perhaps most significant, is to walk humbly with God. Walking, in the Jewish conception, was a way of describing the way one lives. God's people

were to live humbly with him not simply in meekness and mild manners, but in a way that is attentive to God's will. They were to actively pursue what he desires instead of simply chasing their own wants and ways. "In some sense this requirement is the broadest of the three," says Smith, "for if one does this, one will certainly treat others justly and faithfully maintain all the covenant responsibilities."[2]

This is the final call to live outside oneself. What God expects and what God requires is that we think not of ourselves, but of how we relate to and interact with him and others. This is the language of responsibility and rights. But not of pursuing either of those for ourselves. it is the language of responsibility to the rights of others.

Justice and mercy is the language of God's requirement is that we recognize and embrace our responsibilities, not pursue our rights. Our rights are met by others recognizing their responsibilities.

God calls his people to live in light of what he has done on their behalf. To work and act in such a way that honors and respects those around us. That is what God expects of his people.

God has given us Jesus. He has shown us what is good and spoken to us the requirements of the new covenant: love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

—J.R. Hudberg

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1 Gary V. Smith, Hosea, Amos, Micah: NIV Application Commentary, Kindle version.

2 Ibid.

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