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Micah 6:1-8
Minor Leagues:
Insights from the Minor Prophets
...And Justice for All

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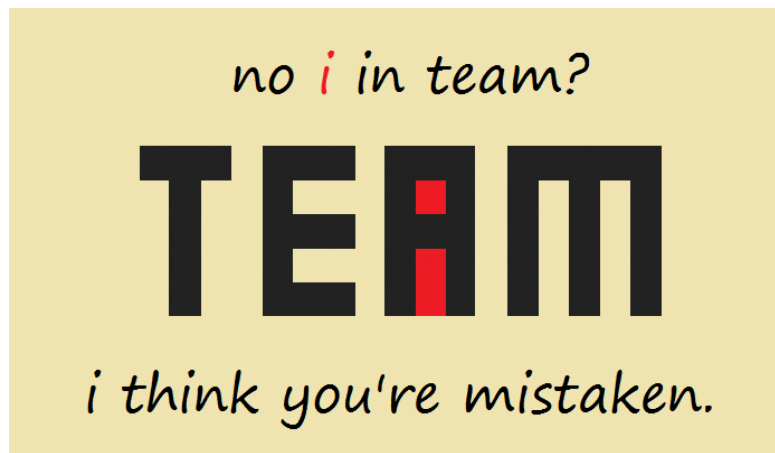
Today's sermon continues our series in the Minor Prophets that we started a couple months ago and will take us through to Labor Day weekend. And one of the things that has really struck me in this series so far (and we see this elsewhere in Scripture, too) is the realization that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Some of the issues that the Prophets raise up are the same ones we're dealing with today. Not all of them, but some of them, definitely. In some ways, perhaps that shouldn't be a surprise, because we're still talking about how human beings relate to one another and how we make sense of the cosmos and our place in it.

For instance, some of the issues highlighted in Micah are: the oppression of the poor (2:1-3, 9); dishonest commercial practices (6:10-11); greed (3:11); loss of community and respect for one another (7:2-6); an abhorrence for God's justice and commandments (3:9-12), and more. These are some of the things Micah was trying to straighten out, and we still struggle with these things today, some 2700 years later. So his writing is like an X-ray, giving us a window to look under the surface of God's people to the deeper things, to see what's actually going on.

A year or two ago, I read an interview with a chef who was talking about what makes food good. And I don't remember who the guy was or where he cooked, but it was some really high-end fancy pants restaurant along the lines of Canlis or Daniels' Broiler. And this chef admitted that a McDonald's burger is really good – not in the sense that it's ingredients are high quality or that it's been carefully prepared...it's not going to win any "best burger" contests – but that it can be just what you need and there's something about it that just tastes good. Why we sometimes crave a McDonald's burger is one of the great unsolvable mysteries of the universe, because when you get into it and inspect it more closely, you realize it's not really that great.

Micah does much the same with the people and culture of his day, as he looks beneath the surface of what can be seen, and it's still relevant for us today as

well. He's like an X-ray into our lives and our culture. In *his* day, he shows us primarily what's going on underneath the surface in Judah, the southern Kingdom of the nation of Israel; there are a few things directed at Samaria, which was the capital of the northern Kingdom. **One of the differences between them and us is that as a nation they were religiously unified: They were Jewish.** So when he preaches to the people of the nation, he's preaching to the "church." We are far from religiously unified. We're not unified on much of anything here in America, it seems. There's a saying that there's no "I" in team, and yet we live in a culture that is so focused on "me" and "i" and elevating the individual above the team that some people have managed to actually **find an "i" in team:**



That's how dis-unified and focused on "i" we are today. So the shared faith that they have is not what we have. And we can't expect people who don't know God to live like people who do. But God's word is still relevant for us who do know Him. This is a word to the Church, to those who say they love God. And the Church and the individuals who make it up, are far from sin-free. And this is all-important to recognize because at the heart of Micah is a question that although never actually written in the book of Micah anywhere, it permeates nearly every verse: **How can God use Israel as a medium of His blessing on all nations when Israel is sinful?** This is *so* pertinent for us, the Church, as well. How can God work through *us*, when sin reigns in our lives?

Before we dive into the passage and see how it relates to this question that hangs over the entirety of the book, let's take a moment to talk about Micah, the person. We don't know a lot about him except what is in verse 1: **The**

word of the Lord that came to Micah of Moresheth during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah—the vision he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem (Micah 1:1). So he’s from Moresheth (about 20 miles south of Jerusalem), which isn’t probably where he actually lived while serving as a prophet, but that would have been the town in which he was born and probably been enough to identify which Micah he was while living in Jerusalem. (Micah was a common name, but there probably weren’t many of them from Moresheth living in Jerusalem.) We see that he was a prophet during the reigns of three different kings, though probably not for the entirety of all three kings’ reign, which combined went over 50 years, from 740 B.C. to 687 B.C. He was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea, who were prophets in the northern kingdom during this time. The book of Micah is a collection of his sermons and writings during his time as a prophet.

He’s not the best-known of the minor prophets today, that’s for sure. That being said, there is one very well-known prophetic word he gave that was a *positive* prophetic word, the kind that you hope *does* come to fruition and is therefore different from what most of Biblical prophecy is, and it’s a prophecy that we frequently read around Christmas, from Micah 5:2. Probably most of us are familiar with this:

**“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).**

It’s a ray of sunshine from Micah...a hope-filled prophetic word in the midst of a bunch of warnings, that Matthew quotes in his biography of the life of Jesus and helps us see that Jesus fulfills it. There is another famous verse that is in today’s passage from chapter 6 that we read a moment ago.

Micah begins this remarkable passage in language that would have immediately brought to the minds of his audience – and perhaps to us as well – a courtroom setting.¹ **He uses the formal language of the law in verse 1, “Arise, plead your case...” But this is no ordinary courtroom of which he speaks.** The plaintiff is God and Micah is his attorney, speaking on God’s

behalf. And before the defendant is called to the stand to hear the charges, an impressive slate of witnesses is called upon. Metaphorically, Micah the attorney summons the mountains and the hills, and the “everlasting foundations of the earth.” Only when the members of the court are formally assembled is the defendant finally named: God has a case to bring against the nation of Israel.

Before the members of the court, God makes his case concerning His chosen people. The actual charge is implied rather than explicitly stated: Israel has grown tired of God and chosen to go its own way. But why? God asks. Has he let them down? Consider the evidence of history, he suggests to the court. He brought Israel to freedom out of Egypt; When they were without leaders, he called forth Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and others. When their existence was threatened again in Moab, he rescued them again. When they crossed the River Jordan, from Shittim (Shi-TEAM is the pronunciation!) to Gilgal, he was with them once again. Clearly, the evidence given to the court substantiates the fact that whatever the reason for Israel’s failure, it cannot be blamed on God.

The defendant then addresses the court. Israel doesn’t dispute either the crime of which it is guilty or the evidence of God’s faithfulness in the past. The question is asked, **“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?” (Micah 6:6a)**. In other words, “What do we need to do to make things right? What do we need to do for God to rescue us?” Israel assumes that there is some ritualistic religious thing they can do to please God and cause God to rescue them. And then a sarcastic response/proposal is given...it’s like a caricature of what they do in their worship services. And of course sarcasm and caricatures often have an element of truth buried in them, so this really cuts to the bone. Shall Israel come with burnt offerings or young calves? How about a thousand rams or ten thousand rivers of oil? If that isn’t enough: How about offering my firstborn child? “Will that be enough for my transgression – the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Micah sees beneath the surface of the faith of the people, and what he sees is that ritual, and religious “stuff” had become an end to itself,

rather than a sign of their relationship with God. The whole sacrificial system and their worship had turned into a kind of national insurance policy, where they felt they could sin as they wish, so long as they kept paying the insurance premiums at the temple. They're hypocritical to the core as they try to cover up their sins of hypocrisy with even more hypocrisy! They needed to sing that song we sang a few minutes ago, "The Heart of Worship." They needed to come back go God, to the heart of worship, to a relationship with Him.

Have you ever watched one of those television courtroom shows? I remember as a teenage occasionally watching "The People's Court" with judge Harry Wapner. I think it was on in the afternoons after school and it served as a mindless way to decompress from the day at school. "Judge Judy" then came along a little later. And in those shows, especially "Judge Judy," so often it seemed like the defendant, or sometimes it was the plaintiff, or sometimes both of them, just had the most ridiculous excuses for behaving as they did, like they think they're going to pull the wool over the eyes of the judge or that their behavior is normal and excusable.

That's kind of what's going on here. It's like Israel thinks they can get away with this; but Micah's prophetic voice calls them on the carpet. He sees what's going on, from the religious priests and other leaders on down the line, and he's calling them out on it.

The whole court scene is drawn to a close in verse 8. **"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."** In other words, the verdict is that their faith is not about a bunch of religious gobbledy-gook. (No, that's not a theological term they teach you in seminary, but it fits.) Now, that stuff actually was serious and God called them to make those animal sacrifices, and so forth, but they were not taking it seriously. It had become a mockery. Their faith is supposed to be about the relationship with God that they have – their "walk" with Him – and then living it out.

Mispat is the Hebrew word for "act justly" (or sometimes it's translated as "do justice") and in this context it signifies God's order for the whole

of life. It includes legal justice, but its meaning is much broader than that. To act justly is to order every area of life in line with God’s will. It’s to be in tune with God and live out His will – for ourselves, for others, and for all of Creation.

Hesed is translated most often as “mercy” and second most as “kindness.” It’s one of the great words of the Old Testament, but doesn’t translate to a single English word very well. **Hesed carries with it a covenant concept – to be faithful to our covenant with God because He is God, and with other people because they are created in God’s image just like any one of us is.** And we are to “love” this Hesed. As it is used here: We are to love mercy...to love kindness toward our fellow humans that is born out of a sense of covenant and loyalty to one another. It’s how we are to treat one another, going beyond the “act justly” of Mispat, and to show mercy even when it’s not called for.

And then lastly, we are to walk humbly with our God. Halak is the word for walk, and it’s pretty straight forward. **Hasanae is the word for “humbly” and it means more than just “modestly” or “in a lowly manner” but also “attentively” or “watching” or “prudently.”** In other words, walk in such a way that you’re paying attention to God’s will, and not your own. It becomes a whole lifestyle, really. It teaches us to sacrifice our pride – which always wants us to go our own way – and instead follow God’s ways, walking in His path. This is really the key piece to being able to do the first two things in this verse. But taken together, these three things encapsulate what God asks of them, and us.

A little over 700 years later, God intercedes and sends his Son, Jesus (ironic given the sarcastic response earlier of Israel willing to sacrifice a child to make up for sin), who fulfills all the religious stuff they did to make things right with God. In Micah’s day, they’d turned it into gobbledy-gook, but at the heart of it was a serious facet of being in relationship with a holy God, with atonement made for their sin. But when Jesus came from heaven to earth, He took care of that atonement with his death on the cross. It is “justice for all,” because Jesus died for the sins of the world – he takes care of our atonement and we benefit from it when we walk with Jesus...when our faith

is in him and we're in relationship with him. And so before he went to the cross, he invited people to do exactly that: walk with Him...to be His disciple and learn how to act justly and love mercy. And this is exactly what Jesus invites us to do. He invites us to follow him, and receive His blessings and then be a medium or a conduit of his blessings to those around us.

Remember, I said near the start of the sermon that there is a question that hangs over the entirety of Micah: **How can God use Israel as a medium of His blessing on all nations when Israel is sinful?** And this 8th verse that closes out the courtroom scene is like the cliff-notes version of the answer to that question: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God. Jesus essentially says the same thing when he is asked what the greatest commandment is, and Jesus gives the top two, saying that we are to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. That's what Jesus did, and it's what He invites us to do as well. He makes it possible when we follow Him, when we walk with Him. And when we take our side of it seriously, and don't live in hypocrisy as they did in Micah's day, God will work through you and me to be a medium of His blessing in other people's lives – right here on the Eastside and around the world. Let's be that conduit of God's blessing, shining the light of Christ in all that we do as we act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Beginning with the paragraph this endnote is in, the next three paragraphs mostly come straight from Peter Craigie's commentary on this passage in his commentary, "The Daily Study Bible – The Twelve Prophets, vol. 2" (although every commentary I read on this passage notes the courtroom setting and the parts that everyone plays in it, so it's not an exclusive insight from Craigie).