

Keeping It Simple

Micah 6:1-8

There is a principle in physics called Occam's Razor. The name comes from William of Occam, a 14th century English friar. Occam's Razor is not an instrument for shaving or cutting things, but is a principle for finding the best solution to a problem or the best answer to a question. The principle is most commonly stated as "All other things being equal, the simplest solution is the best." Application of this principle leads a person looking for an answer to cut away all the unnecessary stuff and just get to the point. It tells you that if there is more than one answer or solution, it is best to go with the simpler one.

More than 2000 years before William of Occam, God spoke through the prophet Micah to give the people an answer to a critically important question in a way that sounds like this principle of simple answers was not a new idea. Micah had a complex question before him: What does God want from us?... and hope for a simple, straightforward answer.

Micah was a prophet in the southern kingdom of Judah, in the time after the glory days of the kingdom of Israel under King David and Solomon, after the kingdom had been divided. At the time of Micah's writing, the northern kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians and the people had been dispersed or assimilated into Assyria. The Northern Kingdom basically ceased to exist.

Then the Assyrians looked south to the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital Jerusalem. The political scrambling that was going on there in the palace would have been comical if it had not been so tragic for the people. The leadership there was looking for some way – any way – to save their positions and, ultimately, their lives. It finally occurred to them that what was facing them was the consequence of their own disobedience of God. Injustice, oppression of the poor, and contempt for religious authority were the order of the day, and at least somebody realized that was not acceptable. They had gotten a glimpse of what was coming their way from the north, and were all of a sudden interested in getting right with God. When they were ready to listen, God reminded them of who God is, and who they are, then on their behalf, Micah asks "What does the Almighty and gracious God want from His people?", and the answer is pretty simple.

READ Micah 6:1-8

They had a great body of law, going back to the days of Moses, and they had a religious establishment to interpret it for them. Unfortunately, they had not been paying attention to the law or its interpretation. Something was not right. So they tried again. The answer was simple.

But it is not the doing of even those simple things that Micah lists that puts us into right relationship with God – not what gets us to that condition we label “salvation”. Our salvation – our freedom from the burden of sin for abundant life now and freedom from the certainty of death for eternal life hereafter – is a gift from God out of his love and mercy and grace toward us. Our continued growth in grace – what the Wesleyan tradition calls sanctification – is also powered by God’s grace. We should never have the idea that we either earn our salvation to begin with or keep our salvation by what we do. There are people who get the truth that we are given salvation by grace – what the Wesleyan tradition calls justification – but then think we have to do things – good works or whatever we call them – to keep it. Like the people of Micah’s time, we think we can work our way into God’s favor – to earn or keep our salvation. I don’t know where that idea comes from, but it is not Biblical. Our salvation will express itself in good works, not because we think those works earn us something, but because we are driven to them by our love for the God who loves us first.

The passage from Micah gives us a great way of thinking about how that salvation, that right relationship with God, can be expressed in the life of the believer. It is not about doubling up on the sacrificial offerings – it is about living a life that is motivated in all things by love for God and love for each other. Salvation is never about what we do because salvation is always about what God does.

Micah’s formulation of this is beautiful and simple: “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” What would that have meant to the people of Micah’s time and what does it mean to us today?

“*To act justly*” would mean that everyone would be treated fairly, regardless of income, social standing, race, color, gender, position in the religious order, health, occupation, or any other characteristic. In the Israel of Micah’s day, justice for the poor or women or non-Jews or handicapped or other forms of disadvantage or dispossession was an afterthought. People without standing or power were just out of luck. Then Jesus came along and ate with tax

collectors, hung out with fishermen, healed lepers and blind and handicapped, and talked with women and children as people of value. He taught in parables that illustrated God's love and care for all people, no matter who they were. He also taught in parables that illustrated the danger of pride in things and position – helping us to understand that those things would have no value in the kingdom of God. Any of this sounding familiar for today?

“To love mercy” would mean that we would be people of forgiveness and grace – that we would understand that on our own we are all less than what God had planned for us, and that all of us are both undeserving of forgiveness and in need of it.

For us to have right relationships with God and with each other, for us to be people that “love mercy”, we have to be people of forgiveness. Forgiveness can be hard, and sometimes it seems unnatural. The more natural thing seems to be to nurse a grudge, to look for opportunities to get even, to plot our revenge. That is a vicious cycle, wrong that just keeps going around in a circle. Does this sound familiar?

To *“walk humbly with your God”* requires us to recognize first that we should be humbled by the presence of God. Jesus got all over the people of His day who made a great show of their religious life – including people who were doing the right things for the wrong reasons. He also got all over people who claimed the authority of God for making decisions about right and wrong and good and evil, and had not consulted God about that. Our modern version of this is “feel-good” religion and “new age” psychology – telling people that they have the power within them to solve all their problems, that meaningful change is not really necessary, and giving the world the idea that we can make all the rules about right and wrong and good and evil. What a load of snake oil! If all that was true, we would not need God – shoot, we would be God. Walking humbly with God demands that we first recognize His complete authority and that we submit ourselves to it.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ can also be expressed in these simple terms: To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. That Gospel turned the world of the first century on its head. It turned the life of Saul, who we know as the Apostle Paul, on its head. From persecutor to persecuted, from hunter to hunted, from enforcer to fugitive, from antagonist to evangelist. Justice came to be about delivering the Gospel to the whole world and recognizing that God did not distinguish or discriminate among His people. Mercy came to be about grace

and the universal nature of forgiveness. Walking with God came to be about submission to God's will and giving up everything for God's service.

There is power in a Gospel that causes such extraordinary things to happen in people – that causes people to see themselves in completely new ways, that causes people to respond to God in ways that even they find unexplainable. The reaction of the Jewish leadership to Jesus and to Stephen and to the other apostles and their preaching is the opposite extreme, but it helps illustrate the power of the Gospel. Does our Gospel have that power? I'm not just asking this for the Church, but for each one of us individually. Does the Gospel we live – Does the Gospel I live – Does the Gospel you live cause anybody to respond? If the Gospel we live does not challenge us to justice and mercy and right relationship with God, we've missed its power. If the Gospel we live does not challenge anybody else to justice and mercy and right relationship with God, we are not living its power.

What does **our** Gospel have to say about doing justice? We are kidding ourselves if we think that everyone is treated fairly. People without power or clout or money or social status get clobbered every day – in Suwannee County, in Florida, in the United States, in the whole world – by people who have those things and think that having them gives them the right to abuse those who don't. Even people with power or clout or money or social status get treated unfairly by people who just don't care whether others are treated with fairness and respect. Our Gospel suffers when we are the instruments of injustice, and our Gospel suffers when we stand around and let it happen.

Don't think we can do anything about it? The Gospel of Jesus Christ says we can. The Gospel of Jesus Christ says that if we take justice seriously, we will do something about it.

What does **our** Gospel have to say about loving mercy? Please understand that mercy is not the same as pardon. The Bible is clear about the need to maintain civil order and about people being appropriately punished by the government for violations of the civil order. That includes our response to everything from shoplifting to international terrorism. The Bible is just as clear in its demand for our mercy and forgiveness and grace. We have to separate the sin from the sinner – to love the sinner and hate the sin. We too often rush to judgement and condemnation of sin, and trample the sinner with it. Our Gospel suffers when we do this, and our Gospel suffers when we stand around and let it happen. That is not mercy. We sit in the

seat of the sinner, no different from any other sinner, all in need of forgiveness and grace and mercy. The Gospel of Jesus Christ says if we are serious about our salvation, we will be agents of mercy.

What does **our** Gospel have to say about walking humbly with God? We have wallowed for way too long in stuff like moral relativism and situational ethics and “I’m OK, you’re OK.” God’s standards are not relative and they do not change. God is God, and we are not. God is the ultimate authority, and when we recognize it, we are humbled. But hear the whole instruction. We are not just to be awed by God; we are to walk with Him. We are to listen to Him, to hear His direction, walk His path, not as an equal but in submission to His love and grace. The Gospel of Jesus Christ says that if we are serious about our salvation, we will be serious about an open, honest, intimate relationship with God.

If we are serious about our salvation, we will never be satisfied or complacent about injustice and judgmentalism and failure of relationship with God and we will never accept the idea that there is nothing we can do about it and we will never tolerate failure as an option. God will not fail to bring about his justice and mercy and right relationship with His people – and what’s left is for us to decide if we are going to be one of them. All these simple instructions are action words: act, love, walk. These are things that people of God do in response to God’s grace, not to earn it or keep it. When we really get it, really grasp what God’s grace has done in and for us, we have to act, love, and walk in it in the same way we have to breathe. If we are going to do what God expects of His people, we will not just be spectators or contributors – we will be doers – acting to bring about justice, delivering mercy as instruments of God’s grace, walking actively with God. Simple to say – simple to do in the power of Almighty God.

Amen.