

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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James Madsen  
Micah  
Micah 6:1-8**

Good morning, everyone. How are you doing? Good! I hope you will be doing even better after the 30 minutes here.

They say that confession is good for the soul so I thought I would start with a small confession this morning. Are you ready? I am not very good at taking care of my yard. I feel better just sharing that with you! This all began in 1991 when I bought my first house on a cul-de-sac in Maple Grove. At the time we could only afford to put sod in the front yard so we seeded the backyard. You know what that means. The backyard was mud, right? And, of course, my next door neighbor was a guy with a perfect yard. I'm not kidding when I tell you that he mowed his yard every other day. The first month we lived there, his little blond six-year-old son came over to our house and said, "My dad says we are not allowed to talk to you because your yard is such a mess." And it was true that in the seven years we lived there, they never talked to us.

Well, a few years ago, we bought a house in Minnetonka, a lovely home, and if you drove by our house like at 60 or 70 miles an hour, you would think that our front yard looked pretty good. But if you were walking by our house, you would notice some glaring weed issues. Our back yard is a jungle. It's out of control. We have the sweetest neighbors and the first summer we lived there, our neighbor Deb came over and said, "You have Creeping Charlie in your yard." I didn't know that it was a weed that was going to take over our yard. I just thought it was a pretty flower and I said, "It's beautiful, isn't it?" And, of course, it took over our yard and so this spring, she came over and said, "You have Creeping Charlie in your yard. Maybe we should *both* have our yards sprayed for weeds."

Sometimes I think we perceive the prophets are like a six-year-old boy who comes over and says, "My dad said we are not allowed to talk to you because your sin is unacceptable." And sometimes I think we perceive the prophets are like my sweet neighbor who comes over and points out our sin and says, "Let me help you with that." But I think most often, the prophets are like the preacher who tells some obscure story about weeds in his yard and then drops the hammer and says, "Oh, by the way, the yard is your heart and the Creeping Charlie is the sin that is taking over your heart and crowding God out of your life." But whether the prophet comes across gently or harshly or with strange, obscure stories, the goal is always the same. The prophet wants to confront our sin and call us to repent and put God at the center of our lives.

The main point this morning is this. More than anything, God wants your heart. He wants you to know how big His love is for you and He wants you to love Him in return. And because He loves us so much, He pursues our hearts relentlessly. He will go to great lengths to get our attention

and this is why He sends the prophets because the prophets are the disrupters of the proud and the comfortable.

You probably noticed what I noticed in this series this summer. The people of God respond to the prophets pretty much the same way all the time. They are really offended. I think the people of God lack repentance because they think they know what is best and they want to do life on their own terms. It's easy for us to be hard on the people of Israel. I mean, by now you'd think they would know better, right? But I'm actually not that much different from them. Every once in a while, my wife will point out something wrong that I am doing, certainly not as often as she should, but I find that no matter how gently she says it to me, I am always offended in my heart. I might be smiling on the outside but I am offended on the inside when she points out my sin. I say all the time that I am the chief of all sinners and yet when someone dares to point out one of those sins, I am offended.

Am I the only one who is like that? Is there anyone else who is offended when someone points out their sin? I wonder why that is. I think in part, it's because I can drift into this illusion that I'm a pretty good person who has outgrown his need for a Savior. I'm 49. I'm kind of mature. I've got my act together more or less and I even have a mug that proves I'm the world's greatest dad. So when my lovely wife points out the truth of my sin and my selfishness, it pops the balloon of my delusion. I know that I'm not alone in this delusion though. George Barna did a study that said that 70 percent of all Christians think that people are basically good. The other 30 percent obviously have toddlers.

We've been knee deep in the prophets all summer. We have looked again and again at the sin and the shortcomings of God's people. We have seen Israel's disdain toward the prophets and their lack of repentance and do you know what I think? I don't think God's people saw themselves as sinners at all. I think they saw themselves as pretty good people, who didn't need to repent and thought they had a handle on how to run their own lives. They had taken on the values and the practices of their pagan neighbors. You could not differentiate between them and their next door neighbors except that they went to the temple each week to do all their religious rituals. As Matt Moberg pointed out a couple of weeks ago, there was a gap between how they perceived themselves and how they were really living their lives. They didn't see what the problem was. They were grabbing the best of both worlds. Do you know anyone else like that?

Part of Israel's problem was that they had stopped reading God's Word. When we stop reading God's Word, we forget right from wrong and we allow culture to define what is right and wrong. But even more importantly, we forget that the source of true life and true love comes from God alone. When we forget that truth, we look to get life from things that don't satisfy us and instead enslave our souls. Sin is essentially anything we put in our hearts in place of God to give us life, purpose, and meaning. For the Israelites, their hearts grew colder toward God as they became more in love with the things of this world.

So now today, we come to the prophet Micah, whose name means *who is like our God*. He was a contemporary of Isaiah and Hosea and he prophesied before the people of God went into exile in Babylon. Micah's prophecy is not a warning like we have heard from previous prophets. It is not *repent or else*. Instead, Micah comes with a pronouncement of judgment. The time for warnings has come and gone. Now is the time for God to intervene and give His children a time out. I am quite familiar with time outs because I have this wonderful four-year-old son named Luke. It's pretty hard to imagine that this kid Luke would ever need a time out but every once in

a while, he wants to do life on his terms. When he does life his way, it often leads to destruction, like toys or food flying through the air. When that happens, I give him a warning and maybe a second warning, but if he continues to defy what is best for him, it's time for a time out. Time outs are not about punishments. They are about disrupting the destructive cycle in our lives. They are about stopping to recalibrate the heart. Parents give time outs because they love their children and they know life is best lived when kids are tuned in to hear their loving parents' voices. We hear about the coming time out in a rather poetic and picturesque way in Micah, chapter 1.

<sup>3</sup> Look! The LORD is coming from his dwelling place;  
he comes down and treads on the heights of the earth.

<sup>4</sup> The mountains melt beneath him  
and the valleys split apart,  
like wax before the fire,  
like water rushing down a slope.

<sup>5</sup> All this is because of Jacob's transgression,  
because of the sins of the people of Israel.

It sounds a bit like when your mother would say, "Just wait until your father comes home." Our highlighted verse today is Micah 6:8.

<sup>8</sup> He has showed you, O man, 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.

You might be familiar with this verse. You've probably seen it on a wall hanging or on someone's t-shirt. I've had several people tell me that it is their life verse. We often use this verse as a prescription on how to have a good life. Do these three things and your good life will be even better. Taken out of context, this verse even seems quite doable. I am tempted today to preach a safe sermon and give you three steps on how to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with your God. You would still like me and you would still be comfortable and your day would be undisturbed, but I wouldn't be faithful to the intention of Micah. Micah 6:8 isn't a prescription for a good life. It isn't about good people becoming better. It is an indictment of the Lord. God is saying, "Oh, man, you knew how you were to live and you haven't done it. Now is the time to face your sin, to face the reality of your heart condition. You think you are good and right but your hearts are far from Me."

Going to the beginning of Micah 6, this becomes more clear to us.

**6** Listen to what the LORD says:

"Stand up, plead my case before the mountains;  
let the hills hear what you have to say.

<sup>2</sup> "Hear, you mountains, the LORD's accusation;  
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.  
For the LORD has a case against his people;  
he is lodging a charge against Israel.

<sup>3</sup> “My people, what have I done to you?  
How have I burdened you? Answer me.

<sup>4</sup> I brought you up out of Egypt  
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

And so on and so on the indictment goes until it ends with

<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the LORD require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?

This isn't three steps to a good life. This is the Lord saying, “I have told you how to live and I have reminded you again and again and you won't turn to me” and like every loving father, He gives His children a time out. You see, the reality is that people who think they are good do not repent. Proud people do not respond to warnings about their bad behavior. When we are proud, we need a wake-up call. Exile then becomes the gift to get our attention. Let's look a little bit more at this exile. Micah chapter 4,

<sup>10</sup> Writhe and groan, O daughter of Zion,  
like a woman in labor,  
for now you shall go out from the city  
and dwell in the open country;  
you shall go to Babylon.  
There you shall be rescued;  
there the LORD will redeem you  
from the hand of your enemies.

This sounds like a paradox, doesn't it? “Writhe and groan and then you will be rescued.” But the truth is, in God's economy, redemption is so often found during our exile because for those of us who think we are good, the only way to discover how much we really need God's mercy is in the difficult situations of our lives. After my divorce, I went through seven years of exile. It seemed like everything I based my identity upon was gone: my marriage, my job as a pastor, my reputation, and the result was that I came apart emotionally, physically, and spiritually. The illusion that I was a pretty good person had burst. I had been basing my relationship with God on my performance and not on the reality that my only hope was that Jesus came to die for a wreck like me. I needed to come to the end of myself to see the reality that Jesus didn't come to make bad people good or even good people better. Jesus came to make dead people alive.

When we come before a holy God and think that we are good and righteous, that reflects the pride that has grown in our hearts. The Bible often tells us that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. Proud people never ask God for His grace and mercy because they don't think they need it. We also saw this in the Gospels when Jesus interacted with the religious elite of the day. They had no room for Jesus because they thought they were good and they were offended at the idea that they needed to repent.

One of the things that stands out to me about Jesus is that He preaches the Law to those who think they are good and He gives grace to those who know they need mercy. Jesus preaches the Law because the Law is a mirror to us. It shows us our true heart condition. When Jesus

preached the Law, He showed that no one is good except God alone and He set the standard for us by saying,

<sup>48</sup> But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect [Matthew 5:48].

The deep, dark recesses of our hearts are important to God and so what is going on internally shows our true condition. Jesus says things like “If you are angry in your heart toward your brother, it is the same as committing murder.” You see, Jesus didn’t come to make the Laws easier; He came to show us how hard they really are. Jesus was showing them what the Law shows us, that we are worse off than we think we are. Like the disciples, we often assume we’re doing fairly well and that while none of us would claim that we’re perfect, we like to think we’re not the worst either. Jesus shows us that He did not come to earth to improve the pretty good. We often judge our standing before God by our outward performance, but God is most concerned about our heart relationship with Him.

By now you’re wondering if there is going to be any good news in this sermon. I find it interesting to see where Micah looks for his salvation. You might expect him to lift up his own righteousness and say, “I have acted justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with my God” but he doesn’t do that. No, he comes before God and confesses his sin and calls upon the mercy of the Lord. In Micah 7, he says this.

<sup>7</sup> But as for me, I will look to the LORD;  
I will wait for the God of my salvation;  
my God will hear me.

<sup>8</sup> Rejoice not over me, O my enemy;  
when I fall, I shall rise;  
when I sit in darkness,  
the LORD will be a light to me.

<sup>9</sup> I will bear the indignation of the LORD  
because I have sinned against him,  
until he pleads my cause  
and executes judgment for me.  
He will bring me out to the light;  
I shall look upon his vindication.

Micah knows that God opposes the proud because He longs to give grace to the humble. The prophet looks to the Lord for his salvation. Micah is honest before God about His sin nature and propensity to sin. He knows that the Lord is the one who will provide the means of salvation. Micah puts his hope in the coming King, the Good Shepherd, who will come from the little town of Bethlehem. The good news for us today is that Micah’s hope is our hope. Let’s look at Micah 5.

<sup>2</sup> But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,  
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,  
from you shall come forth for me  
one who is to be ruler in Israel,  
whose coming forth is from of old,  
from ancient days.

<sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,  
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.  
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great  
to the ends of the earth.  
<sup>5</sup> And he shall be their peace.

How cool is this! Our little prophet Micah does not rely on his own goodness but instead trusts in God's provision for a Savior! Micah proclaims that only a remnant of Israel will be saved. It would take another 700-plus years until the Savior was born in the little town of Bethlehem. Micah doesn't trust in his own ability to save himself; he looks to the Lord to provide. He puts his trust in Jesus, the Shepherd King, who has provided the way for us. God offers His grace to anyone who will come before the Lord and ask for mercy because Jesus doesn't build His Kingdom with good people, but with the poor and the needy, with those who know they need a Savior.

Faith is synonymous with trusting and relying. Micah is prompting us to ask ourselves: what are we trusting in to give our lives meaning and purpose? What are we relying on to justify ourselves before the living God? We are not called on to defend ourselves in the court of God but to throw ourselves on His mercy because the Law has shown us that we are guilty. But Jesus, the innocent, died for us, the guilty, so that God might forgive us. Faith then means taking Jesus as our righteousness because we have none of our own. Martin Luther calls this *the wondrous exchange*, this reality that Jesus lived a life of obedience that we could never live and died the death that we deserve, paying off the debt for our sins. Jesus gave to us His righteousness so that we can stand before the Father just as if we had always obeyed. It means you no longer have to worry about God's judgment because the righteousness of Christ is now credited as your very own. We stand before the Father holy and blameless because we have Christ's perfect righteousness. Isn't that amazing! I want to show you a video of my wife Anna's testimony to show how this was lived out in her life.

[Video begins.]

When God looks at you, what is the expression on His face? Is He happy? Are His eyebrows furled in anger? Perhaps His eyes just look through you in indifference. When God looks at me what is the expression on His face?

I grew up in a nominally Catholic home and imagined God's expression toward me somewhere between disappointed and aloof. As a teenager, I went searching for the love and validation from others that I had missed while growing up. I never dared pray for forgiveness. I assumed God had written me off long ago and yet, I yearned for a new start. Some of my high school classmates at the time, those I deemed good and clean, suddenly started talking to me. They were interested in my life and invited me to do things with them. I resisted for a long time, playing the cool card, but underneath I was petrified they would reject me as soon as they realized all the things I had done. Yet they wore me down and eventually through their constant pestering, I ended up at a Young Life club.

As soon as I walked into the room, I knew there was something special there and I was immediately hooked. When I heard the speaker say that Jesus loved me and wanted to be with me so much that even if I had been the only person to ever have lived, He still

would have died for me, my heart leapt. Could it be true Jesus knew me and everything about me and still came to rescue me because He wanted to be in a relationship with me?

That night I saw love and acceptance in the face of God and I surrendered my life to Him. That was almost 25 years ago. Truly my life was never the same since that moment and yet there are still struggles I have to work through. My need for cleansing never waned. No, it actually seemed to increase and I began to try to outrun it, doing even more for God and more for others. It seemed to work for a while and yet I was exhausted. Life piled on and God seemed distant and small.

If I had imagined the expression on God's face, it would have been that of a taskmaster and it was in that condition that I found myself on a weeklong trip to Ireland. My stated motive for going was to serve God. I wanted to do something big for God. I don't know, maybe I thought it would get me noticed by God again.

There I was, almost completely missing the most beautiful place I had ever seen because I was so focused on trying hard to do above and beyond what God might expect of me. And then it hit me. Sitting there in a small room, listening to an Irish pastor talk about how Jesus was at work in this church and this village, I began to feel the weight of my self-centeredness. I could barely breathe. I got up and ran outside and down the lane as if I could outrun God. I finally stopped and sat on a rock on the edge of the Irish Sea and wept. I was at the end of myself. And there, Jesus met me. It was as if He were standing there right in front of me saying, "Look at Me. Look at what I have done for you. You don't have to be perfect. I did that for you so now, it's not about you. It's about Me. It's about My grace." He knew I was a sinner when He came to die for me and He knows I will continue to struggle against sin as long as I'm this side of heaven. My sin, what I've done or haven't done, is no longer the point. The point is that because of what He has done, His life, His death, His resurrection, I belong to Him.

That day on the rocks, I saw the expression on God's face clearly. I saw His smile and the enjoyment on His face as He looked at me. I saw the love in His eyes and this expression doesn't vary. And as much as my heart rejoices to remember this news, I often forget it. I can't believe how easy it is to revert to trying to keep the rules to earn favor with God. I need to hear the amazing news of the finished work of Christ every single day. I need to hear it when times are good for it is my true hope. I need to hear it in times of suffering when it is my *only* hope. And I need to remind you of it because doing so helps me remember what Jesus has done for me. When God looks at you, what is the expression on His face?

[Video ends.]

Anna shows us that living by faith frees us to walk humbly with our God in joy and confidence. More than anything, God wants a relationship with you. He wants your heart and He wants you to know how big His love is for you. By now, you know that the Greatest Commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. It is an impossible command to keep because when I am honest with myself, it is clear that I love so many things more than God. This command alone should show me how much I need Jesus, but it is the greatest because

everything our hearts need is found in God. It shouldn't feel like a burden to us but a gift because the abundant life is found only in Him.

Walking humbly with God should be the central thing in our lives. The reality is that every day, something else, me, myself, and I, tries to become the center of my life. That is why all of life is a two-step dance of faith and repentance. Just as we walk left foot, right foot, our walk with the Lord moves along with faith and repentance. Faith is trusting in what Jesus has done on our behalf to make us right with the Father. Repentance is turning away from anything else we look to to give us life. And we do both all day long every day as we walk humbly with our God.

As we grow in our understanding of our need for a Savior and even more the reality of what a great Savior we have, our heart experiences how amazing grace really is and then we begin to love mercy. There is the reality that no one gives grace more that the person who has experienced amazing grace themselves. When our hearts are full of God's mercy, it flows freely to those around us. And as we draw close to Jesus, we act justly. As our hearts fall continually in love with Him, then out of our hearts flow good works. We tend to think it is our good works that bring us close to God when, in fact, it is our closeness to God that produces good works. Jesus said,

<sup>5b</sup> Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit [John 15:5b].

Good works flow out of our heart relationship with Jesus. We then obey God's commands not out of duty or obligation, but out of joy and love. We delight to do God's will. We delight to love others just as God has loved us. Whatever is important to God becomes important to us.

Acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God is the response of our grateful hearts as we embrace the gift of God's grace given to us through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Micah concludes his prophecy by again reminding us that our hope is in the character and mercy of our loving heavenly Father. He says this.

<sup>18</sup> Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity  
and passing over transgression  
for the remnant of his inheritance?  
He does not retain his anger forever,  
because he delights in steadfast love.

<sup>19</sup> He will again have compassion on us;  
he will tread our iniquities underfoot.  
You will cast all our sins  
into the depths of the sea [Micah 7:18-19].

God is pursuing your heart today. How will you respond? He wants you to know the fullness of life that is found only in relationship with Him. Will you turn your heart toward God, humble yourself and ask for His grace? We never outgrow our need for this grace. We never outgrow our need for a Savior. Before I close in prayer today, let us spend a moment in quiet prayer. I want you to picture God's face looking down upon you. Picture God rejoicing over you, smiling at you because He loves you more than you can ever imagine. [Pause.]

Let's pray together.

Spirit of the living God, we know that You are here in this place. We know that You love us and that You are pursuing us. We come before You and confess that at times our hearts have grown cold toward You. We are so thankful, Father, that You do not hold our sins against us but instead that You sent Jesus to die in our place so that we may stand before You with confidence. We know that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We know that You see us as holy and blameless because You see us through the work of Your Son and so we give thanks. We ask that You would teach us to open our hearts to receive Your love and to live in Your love and Your grace. In Thy Name. Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*