

# Followers of the Way

## What Does the LORD Require? JUSTICE

Steve Campbell 18-02-24

### Micah 6:1-8

Where is the most dangerous place in a Church building? The pulpit! When you mount those steps to preach and are six feet above contradiction, with all eyes fixed on you and all ears open to hear what you have to say, your ego can step in and you are tempted to think, 'This is all about *me!* I have captivated this audience with my oratory and charm!' Sadly, many a preacher has succumbed to that thought.

In the last Church I served in here in Northern Ireland, the pulpit was a magnificent feature; yet lest I, or anyone was, tempted to go down an ego trip, inscribed upon the stone were these words:

He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?

These words from Micah 6:8 are timely reminder of the LORD's requirements and form the basis of our sermon series. So far, we have learned that the LORD requires obedience and righteousness. Today it is justice.

New Bible Dictionary definition of justice 'that moral standard by which God measures human conduct'. This measure is from God because *He* is the most just being in the universe, so all justice comes from Him.

He is the Rock, his works are perfect,  
and all his ways are just.  
A faithful God who does no wrong,  
upright and just is he. (Deut 32:4)

After the LORD redeemed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, He gave them His law at Mt Sinai. These commandments were given to show how the redeemed of the LORD ought to live, and central to the law is justice.

Chris Wright in his book *Living as the People of God* states,

No idea is more all-pervasive in the Old Testament than that God is a God of righteousness and justice.<sup>1</sup>

Now I'm sure you've heard comments like, 'I can accept Jesus and His teaching, but not the God of the Old Testament with all His wrath and judgement.' And they make the quip, 'If we follow the rule "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" we would all be walking around blind and toothless!'

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, C. *Living as the People of God*, IVP Leicester, 1983, p.133

There are two things to say about this: First, the idea that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New are two different entities is nothing new, it is simply an old heresy recycled. It first appeared in the Second Century through the teaching of Marcion, who claimed allegiance to Jesus and Paul the Apostle. As he was fiercely anti-semitic, his Scriptures contained only ten of Paul's Epistles and an edited version of the Gospel of Luke. He mustn't have realised that Jesus speaks of hell and punishment much more than all the Old Testament put together.

Secondly, those who quote the rule "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" are misquoting the Scriptures and missing the point. It is taken from Exodus 21:22-25:

If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

The law refers to injury caused to a pregnant woman, so it offers protection to both the woman and her unborn child, which in itself is very unusual. But where it goes on to give the consequence for serious injury – eye for eye, tooth for tooth etc. – this is actually limiting retribution. Instead of escalating reprisals for wrongdoing (such as Lamech in Genesis 4:24, 'If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times'), the punishment must *only* fit the crime.

Another law offering justice to all was the Year of Jubilee, when all debts were cancelled, all slaves freed and property restored to its original owner.

Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan. (Lev 25:10)

God's justice extended not just to weightier matters like Jubilee, He was also concerned with the smaller details. Health and safety is something we hear a lot about these days, but it wasn't just developed in our own day. Most houses in Bible times were built with flat roofs, which were used for working, drying food and textiles, and providing guest accommodation. So being flat and of a substantial height, there was a certain danger in being up on the roof. But the LORD had thought of that:

When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof. (Deut 22:8)

The famous legal quote by Lord Hewart could easily apply to the Israelites, "justice must not only be done, but must be seen to be done".

As the redeemed people of God living under His law, the Israelites were to reflect His perfect justice to the surrounding nations. They were to do this by following the two greatest commandments: to love the LORD their God with all their heart, soul and strength and to love their neighbour as themselves (Deut 6:5, Lev 19:18). However, they failed to live up to God's ideals: they broke His covenant and turned to idol worship; and instead of loving and exercising justice towards their

neighbour, they became corrupt and injustice prevailed – the rich became richer and the poor were exploited. Eg. there is no solid evidence that the Year of Jubilee was ever observed.

So God sent prophet after prophet to warn them to repent and turn back to Him. We see this clearly in Micah 6 where the passage reads like a courtroom drama. Micah, whose name means, 'Who is like Yahweh?', prophesied around the same time as Isaiah, during a period of material prosperity, but spiritual decline. His message was one of impending judgement but also a call to repentance.

Chapter 6 begins with the LORD's summons against His people vv.1&2. God's case against Israel is not just a private civic matter that affects them alone, it concerns the whole of creation. That's why He calls the mountains and hills to witness, it is because their actions have an effect on the whole world. Other nations looking on will see God's name honoured or defamed by what Israel does.

Although the accusation of injustice is not mentioned in these verses, it is set out in Ch.3:1&9.

Next the LORD interrogates His people vv.3-5. By reminding them how much He has done for them, He is showing that they had no grounds to turn away and break the covenant. He redeemed them from slavery in Egypt; they were in bondage to Pharaoh and the LORD broke those bonds, leading them out towards the Promised Land.

When others sought to destroy them, such as Balaak king of Moab who hired Balaam to curse the Israelites, the LORD blessed them instead. Throughout the 40 years of wandering in the wilderness they experienced the 'saving acts of the LORD.'

The mention of 'Shittim to Gilgal' is significant: according to Numbers 25 the covenant was broken when they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor; and in Joshua 5 it was renewed at Gilgal.

vv.6&7 are the people's response. The list of sacrifices with their increasing numbers and intensity exposes the absurdity of the people's attitude. They think that by doing this, by fulfilling their religious obligations, they are pleasing God, and how they conduct themselves otherwise doesn't matter. As David Prior states,

'They had managed to perfect the perennial heresy of compartmentalizing their religious beliefs and practices from their daily occupations and business.'<sup>2</sup>

Doesn't that describe a lot of people today? They go to Church on a Sunday, say their prayers and pay their subscription fee; so as long as they've done their religious duty, who cares how they live their lives the rest of the week?

This is not how God sees things, He is not interested in mere outward ritual, but with the heart. As Samuel had earlier cautioned King Saul,

Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings  
and sacrifices  
as much as in obeying the LORD?

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<sup>2</sup> Prior, D, The Message of Joel, Micah & Habakkuk, IVP Leicester, 1998, p.105

To obey is better than sacrifice,  
and to heed is better than the fat of rams. (1 Sam 15:22)

And so, in v.8 we hear the LORD's requirements. Because God is a God of justice, the first requirement is that His people should also be a people of justice – to act justly or to do justice. The Hebrew word, *mishpat*, found over 400 times, means 'right judgement.' The covenant law given to Moses showed the people how to live as a just nation, but they failed to live up to the LORD's requirements, and so the prophets were sent to call the people back to their covenant responsibilities, including the weighty matter of justice.

The second thing the LORD requires is mercy; this translates the Hebrew word *hesed*, which can also mean loving kindness. Theologian John Oswalt said *hesed* is '...a completely undeserved kindness and generosity'.<sup>3</sup>

It is similar to the Greek word *agape* which indicates God's undeserved love for us and our unconditional love for others. Sadly, this too was lacking in Israel, as the Lord said through another prophet Hosea, a contemporary of Micah's ministering in the Northern Kingdom, 'For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings' (Hos 6:6).

Justice and mercy were to be administered, not with haughtiness, but in a spirit of humility, thus the LORD's third requirement, 'to walk humbly with your God.' To walk means to live, so their lives were to display that humble and faithful dependence on God. That they failed to fulfil the LORD's requirements is evidenced by the Exile, a punishment fit for their disobedience.

Christians, as the redeemed people of God living under the New Covenant, are to fulfil the Lord's requirements to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. Yet are we any better than the Israelites of old? Granted, our laws are based on the Commandments He gave, but we still fail Him as much as they did. We are, in the words of the Book of Common Prayer, miserable sinners. I saw a sign outside a Church building – 'Sin is a small word with a large sentence.' That's what we all deserve, the just punishment for our sin. If we were in the dock, like the Israelites, the sentence we would receive is the death penalty, eternal separation from God.

So how can the perfect, just and holy God accept miserable sinners like us? How can He be true to His own justice while at the same time offer us forgiveness?

Well the Bible is clear, He sent His only Son Jesus, the perfect sinless One, who totally fulfilled the law's demands and took upon Himself the punishment we deserve. In this way God does exactly what He demands of His own people: exercising justice by punishing sin, but tempering it with mercy by taking the punishment Himself. So Paul could write in Romans 3:26 that, God is both 'just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.'

John Stott, whose whole life and ministry was associated with All Souls, Langham Place, used an illustration from the city of London that he knew so well. He said, 'The skyline is dominated by two domed buildings atop of which are two significant symbols. The first is the Old Bailey with the statue of Lady Justice, blindfolded for impartiality, with the sword of justice in her right hand and

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<sup>3</sup> [The Meaning of Hesed: Hebrew Word for Love — FIRM Israel](#)

the scales for sifting evidence in her left. The second is St Paul's Cathedral displaying a huge cross above its dome.'

The first represents those who, like the Israelites in Micah 6, think that the more religious duties they perform, the greater their piety, the better chance they have of tipping the scales in their favour and of God accepting them into heaven. In other words, it is a symbol of our unfinished works. Whereas the cross represents Christ's finished work on our behalf. There, and only there, was justice satisfied. When He cried out, 'It is finished!' (Jn 19:30) the debt was cancelled, the punishment taken. And we have been set free through faith in Christ.

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift of justice and mercy. Amen.