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Doing Justice

Our response to the injustice highlighted by the Prophets should be to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God.

Introduction

I want to talk to you about a concern that lies at the heart of the Prophets, but let's start with a question. Think about the basic human emotions—joy, sadness, comfort, anger, and serenity—and tell me, which emotion do you think most often characterizes the Prophets? Don't the Prophets strike you as kind of cranky? Honestly. Let me give you a few examples. Amos said, "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan ... who oppress the poor and crush the needy" (Amos 4:1). Isaiah says, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings. Your incense is detestable to me ... I cannot bear your evil assemblies" (Isaiah 1:13).

Micah 3:1–3 says, "Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil—who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones, who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin, break their bones in pieces, chop them up like meat for the pan?" Doesn't that sound a little over-the-top to you?

Not only do they use angry words, but Prophets also resort to shock tactics that often look downright bizarre. Hosea marries a prostitute to show how unfaithful the Israelites have become. Ezekiel eats food cooked over excrement to show how defiled God's people have become. Jeremiah digs up a filthy, buried, unwashed undergarment to use as an object lesson to show people how repellent their behavior is to God. The Prophets are filled with stuff like this, and we don't like it. We like happy books. So why should we read the Prophets?

We need to hear the message of the Prophets.

For one thing, we do it because they're in the Bible. It would not be a good thing to have Obadiah walk up to you and say, "How'd you like my book?" and then for you to say, "Well, I didn't actually read it. It was in a bad location and it was too whiney." More than that, there is a reason why God chose 17 books of the Bible to be the books of the Prophets. There is a reason for the anger of the Prophets. There is a reason why we, maybe more than almost any Christians in any other era, need to submit ourselves to the discipline of regularly sitting under their words. I'll try to explain to you why.

Imagine you're listening to somebody sing, and they're singing off key and loudly. Some of you have just recently had that experience. Now, if you're musically insensitive—if you have a tin ear—it doesn't bother you much. If you have a tin ear and the singer is your grandchild, it may even give you pleasure. But if you're musically sensitive—if you have perfect pitch—it's a different story. You know what the song could be and should be; you know how far it's off. You look at tin-eared grandma and wonder, *How can she listen to this? How can she stand it?* This is painful to you. You're in agony. Now imagine listening to that horrible sound minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, and year after year.

We read the Prophets and think, *What's the big deal? What are they getting so heated up about? Society's not so bad. Things are generally going okay for me. I know there's violence in the world—and it's regrettable—but as long as it doesn't touch my life, I'd prefer not to think much about it. Certainly that violence couldn't be connected to my anger, my hostility, my indifference, or my lack of love. Cheating is another example. I know it's not ideal, but it goes on every day in the business world. Pick up the business section. Pick up the newspaper. It's just the way things are!*

The same thing goes for poverty and disease. Eight thousand children and young people are born with or infected with HIV every day in sub-Saharan Africa. It's now the leading cause of death. A few miles from this very room, children are growing up in ghettos or slums or barrios. They are born in desperate poverty. They will grow up without access to decent education or medicine or housing. But we think, *They're not my children. Maybe their parents did something to deserve it! And so what if the poor sometimes got the shaft in ancient Palestine? Where is it any different? Why go off the deep end? Somebody shaves the truth a little for profit. Somebody ignores the poor. Somebody gets a little wrapped up in their own comfort, a little careless about remembering those in need, and the Prophets act like the world's falling apart!*

Jesus, who the Scriptures say was also a Prophet, insists that every time someone is in prison and doesn't get visited, every time somebody's hungry and doesn't get fed, every time somebody's naked and doesn't get clothed, he's the one who suffers. Jesus dies a little bit. *What's the big deal?* we think. *What are you guys getting all heated up about?*

Let me explain to you "the big deal." The Prophets were given a heavy burden of looking at our world and seeing what God sees and knowing what God knows and feeling what God feels—and it crushed them. They saw rich people trying to get richer, looking the other way while poor people died. They assumed God was pleased with their lives and the world was getting along pretty well.

We really don't want to know the truth about what our sin has done in our lives and to our world. We would prefer not to know because that would make us uncomfortable. Micah spoke for all the Prophets when he said, "If a liar and deceiver comes and says, 'I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,' he would be just the Prophet for this people'" (Micah 2:11).

What does beer do? Does it make you more comfortable or more alert? It makes you more comfortable! Micah says the people want a Prophet of comfort.

Listen to the words of Abraham Heschel, one of the great students of the Prophets of the 20th century: "The shallowness of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures, is a simple fact of fallen humanity which no explanation can justify or hide."

The events that horrified and appalled and broke and crushed the Prophets are everyday occurrences in our world. We don't want to know. We don't want to see. We don't want anybody to tell us about human misery and injustice. We just get used to it—like you get used to wearing your watch or you get used to the stuff you haven't fixed around the house. After awhile, you just don't notice anymore. But the Prophets noticed. That was their gift. That was their burden. The Prophets noticed.

Heschel also said: "The Prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul, and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Prophecy is the voice God has lent to the silent agony. God is raging in the Prophet's words."

God is raging in the Prophets' words. The Prophets really do speak for God. They see what God sees. They speak what God feels, and we omit them from our lives. We omit

them from our reading of Scripture. We omit them from residence in our minds at the peril of our own souls and of our world.

So how do we respond? What should we do? Should we just be paralyzed by the immensity of injustice in this world? Should we just sit around doing nothing but feeling intense guilt because of our own complicity in it?

The Prophet Micah sums up the response God is looking for. It's one of the most magnificent statements ever uttered by a human being, and it's the only statement that I'll ask you to carry away tonight. If you grasp this, you grasp *the* heart of the Prophets. Micah 6:6–8 (RSV):

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before the God on high? Shall I come to him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams? With ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"

Notice the escalation in the text. Everyone could afford burnt offerings. Not many could afford a calf that is a year old. As for a thousand rams, only the king could offer that. Ten thousand rivers of oil are well beyond what anybody could do. The sacrifice of a firstborn child is a pagan ritual that surrounded Israelite culture. Is that what God wants? *No*.

"He has shown 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"

Micah says: You can pretend and act confused about what God wants, but he has shown you. From the very beginning, God has been quite clear about what he wants.

God wants us to do justice.

Micah highlights three things that everyone can do, and he starts with a command to "do justice."

Think for a moment about how mad you get when somebody treats you unfairly. Every one of us in here could tell stories of injustice, and our blood will boil pretty quickly.

Dave Hagler, a former referee and umpire, has the ultimate story of justice. "I was driving too fast in the snow in Boulder, Colorado," he writes in an *LA Times* story, "and a policeman pulled me over and gave me a speeding ticket. I tried to talk him out of it, telling him how worried I was about insurance, what a good driver I am, and so on. He told me if I didn't like it, I could go to court. First game of the next baseball season, I'm umpiring behind home plate, and the first batter up is the same policeman. I recognize him; he recognizes me. He asks me, 'How did the thing with the ticket go?' I tell him, 'Swing at everything.'"

We hate it when somebody treats us unfairly. If it happens in my work, with my friends, or even in my family, we tell those stories. We dream about how to get revenge. Most of the movies we go to see are about somebody getting hurt and wronged, and then trying to get revenge.

God is telling you, through Micah, to get at least as energized about someone else being the victim of injustice as you are when you're the victim. In particular, be concerned about injustice to those you might be inclined to overlook. It goes on everyday in our world.

This is from a tremendous book by Miroslav Volf, a great Christian thinker in our day. It's called *Exclusion and Embrace*. It's a first person story from a woman who lives in Eastern Europe. "I'm a Muslim," she said. "I'm 35 years old. To my second son I gave the name 'Jihad,' so he would not forget the testament of his mother—revenge. The first time I put my baby at my breast, I told him, 'May this milk choke you if you forget.' The Serbs taught me how to hate."

The woman goes on to describe her work as a teacher—how the very people she taught and cared for became her enemies. She says, "My student Zoran, the only son of my neighbor, urinated into my mouth. As the bearded hooligans stood around laughing, he told me, 'You are good for nothing else, you stinking Muslim woman.'"

We live in a world where injustice, large and small, goes on everyday, everywhere. Micah says this is what God requires of you: Do justice. Be an agent of justice. I can't correct all the injustice of the world, but I can do something. I can notice. I can read. I can study. I can be thoughtful about what's going on in this world. I can pay attention to which

governments and companies are being just and which are not. I can pray. I can ask God to help me treat others fairly. I can at least have the courage to stand up for people who are getting treated unfairly in my little world—in my school, my office, my neighborhood, and my home. I, who have so much more than I need, so much more than I deserve, I can give some of what I have to others who have no food or no home or no hope. You know what the Lord requires of you. Do justice.

God wants us to love kindness.

And then, love kindness. The word Micah uses is *hesed*. In the Old Testament, it is the word most closely associated with God's lovingkindness expressed in the covenant, which is the basis of his relationship with human beings. It is steadfast love that always seeks to express itself in action.

In a town called Paradise, California, lives a young man named John Gilbert. When he was five years old, John was diagnosed with Duchenne's Muscular Dystrophy. It is genetic, progressive, and cruel. He was told it would eventually destroy every muscle in his body and in a decade or so, take his life.

Every year, John lost something. One year, it was the ability to run. Another year, he could no longer walk straight. He's 25 now. When he couldn't do anything else, he could operate a mouse. He's written an unbelievable manuscript of his life, 90 pages long. He writes that junior high was the hardest era of his life. It is for almost everybody. Tony Campolo has said Roman Catholic theology is right—there really is such a thing as purgatory, and it's junior high. It was worse for John, though. He was bullied and humiliated until he was afraid to go to school. No one ever stood up for him, maybe because they were afraid for themselves—afraid to do justice and show kindness.

But there were other moments in John's life where kindness was shown. One year, when he was just a child, he was named California's ambassador for Muscular Dystrophy. He and his mother were ushered into a private meeting with the governor in Sacramento. The governor took out a large glass jar of candy and told John to dig in. John looked at his mom, and she said it was okay to take one piece. The governor said he was the governor, and John should do what he said. So John stuffed his pockets!

Later that night, the NFL sponsored a fundraising auction dinner at which John was a guest. Players let him hold their huge SuperBowl rings, which slid up to John's wrists. And when the auction began, one item especially caught his attention. It was a

basketball that was signed by all the players of the Sacramento Kings NBA team. John got a little carried away about that, because when that ball was being bid for, he raised his hand. As soon as it went up, his mom flagged it down. "Astronauts never felt as many Gs as my wrist did that night," he said.

Bidding for that basketball went to an astounding amount for an item that was not the most valuable treasure on the docket. Eventually, one man named a figure that shocked the whole room. Nobody could match it. The guy went to the front and collected his prize, but instead of returning to his seat, the man walked across the room and placed the basketball in the small, thin hands of the boy who had admired it so intently. He put it in hands that would never dribble it down a court, never throw it to a teammate on a fast break, and never fire it from three-point range. John says the whole room just came undone. Every heart melted.

You have so much health and time, a brand new day, and more resources than you know how to consume—have you bought a basketball for anybody lately? Do you love kindness? That's what the Lord requires of us.

God wants us to walk humbly with him.

Do justice. Love kindness. And the third—walk humbly before your God. I think Micah included that one because it's hard work to be a Prophet and not get self-righteous about it. Did you ever notice that? Ever see anybody in a church who loves to go around correcting other people? There's a kind of person who loves to do that, who loves to pass judgment in a spirit of arrogant superiority, which they then cover up by saying, "I'm a Prophet. I have the gift of prophecy." There is a very important theological distinction between being Prophet and being a jerk. What burns most deeply in the heart of a true Prophet is not anger; it's love.

C. S. Lewis wrote, "Anger is the fluid that love bleeds when it gets cut." And God's anger is fierce when he sees injustice and greed and oppression, because God's love is fiercer still. A true Prophet remembers that she or he, too, is one of the sinful people who helped mess up this world, and so they walk humbly.

Conclusion

Can you imagine what would happen if we all made it the focus of our lives to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly before our God?

In the final chapter of his book, Micah says eyes will be opened up and the message of the Prophets will be understood. In Micah 7:16–19, he writes, "Nations will see and be ashamed ... They will come trembling out of their dens and turn in fear to the Lord our God and will be afraid of you. Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives transgressions ... You will again have compassion on us and hurl our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

What does God require of you? Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly before the Lord your God. But will you really do it? Because I just want to tell you—it's a big deal.

John Ortberg

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Scripture: [Micah 6:6-8](#)

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