



WHAT IS WORSHIP?

SERIES: STUDIES IN THE MINOR PROPHETS

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Micah 6:1-8

First Message

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Almost exactly thirty years ago, in fact, the date was June 12th, 1966, Ray Stedman taught on the book of Micah. He was doing a series in which he covered an entire book of the Bible each week. I have always had a lot of respect for Ray, but after facing this same task, I am amazed that he could teach on whole books of the Bible week after week after week. One hope that I have this morning, and I know that Ray would have shared this, is that you will be encouraged to read the Minor Prophets as we learn about them in this series.

Background: A World and Man of Contrasts

Most of us already know some of the familiar verses of the book of Micah. Every Christmas we hear his beautifully worded prophecy about Messiah coming from Bethlehem:

**But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity (5:2, NASB).**

It was Micah who also uttered the well known verses from the end of our text this morning—words which are among the most famous in the Old Testament:

**He has told you, O Man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)**

I will take a moment to cover some background for this wonderful little seven-chapter book.

Micah's world and his prophecies are filled with sharp contrasts. He prophesied during the reigns of several kings, two of whom were Ahaz and Hezekiah. It was Ahaz, one of the most wicked of the kings of Judah, who threw his own child into the flaming hands of the idol Molech, there to die a horrific death. Hezekiah, in contrast, is the king who prayed for God's mercy when he was ill, and he was granted an additional fifteen years of life. Although Hezekiah was not perfect, he knew something about Yahweh's loyal love and attempted to respond to it in faith and holiness.

Micah also knew grave contrasts when it came to national history. During his life, the kingdom of Israel came to a bitter end. The cruel armies of Assyria, the Nazis of the ancient world, destroyed Samaria in 722-721 BC, and deported the Israelites. In amazing contrast, God miraculously saved Judah from destruction by the Assyrians. This story is related in one of the most dramatic accounts in all of Scripture, 2 Kings 18-19.

So this is a book of stunning contrasts and breathtaking leaps. In Micah's prophecy, hope and doom are woven together and examined separately. At times it is difficult to know when the prophet has switched from one mode to the other. One moment he casts his eye around his world and cries doom. Unequivocally he states that God will judge the terrible wickedness and sin found especially in the spiritual, social, and governmental leaders of Jerusalem. Moments later he is painting a picture of all of God's people gathered together as a remnant, being led by God as by a shepherd, to live gloriously and forever in peace and plenty. Then, weapons of death and destruction will be transformed into tools for farming.

Micah contrasts the professional prophets of his day, who prophesy pleasing things only for the patrons who feed and pay

them, with himself:

**On the other hand I am filled with power -
With the Spirit of the Lord -
And with justice and courage
To make known to Jacob his rebellious act,
Even to Israel his sin (3:8).**

Many OT scholars think that Micah was a suburban shepherd. Not being integrated into the ways of the highbrow city of Jerusalem, the prophet could see with a clear eye the evil of the people who lived there, and he was not intimidated by the positions of power they held. As a shepherd, Micah was deeply sympathetic for the ordinary citizens in God's nation. Consider the gruesome picture he paints, in 3:1-3:

**Hear now, heads of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel.
Is it not for you to know justice?
You who hate good and love evil,
Who tear off their skin from them
And their flesh from their bones,
And who eat the flesh of my people,
Strip off their skin from them,
Break their bones,
And chop them up as for the pot
And as meat in a kettle. (3:1-3)**

The Question of Worship

So, out of all of this rich content, where should we focus? As I studied through each chapter, with my family and on my own, I thought with each passing text that I had found the place from which to teach. But, in the end, I came to the conclusion that by covering 6:1-8, I could accomplish two things at once: 1) introduce us to the context of Micah 6:8 and so provide insight into one important section of the minor prophets; and 2) address a question which has been in my heart for a long time, and for which I still have no completely satisfactory answer. That question is: What is worship?

How is it that I can use this passage to speak about worship? you ask. Even though the word itself is not included, the OT idea of worship is. Look at verse 6:

**With what shall I come to the Lord
And bow myself before the God on high? (6:6a)**

If we look at worship in the broadest biblical perspective, the OT is clear about what it involves. Two fundamental notions, taken together, make up the OT notion of worship: the idea of prostrating, or bowing down, and the idea of obedience and service. I think we intuitively understand worship in the first sense: the sense of bowing before the Lord, of being prostrate before him. But I believe that we have by and large lost the second part of the OT understanding of worship, and that is the idea of service. The Hebrew word *abad* is used hundreds of times in the OT. Most often it simply means "serve." But it is also frequently translated as "worship."

I have been troubled by this notion of worship for at least fifteen years. At church, I would hear people talk about the Sunday morning gathering as a time for "worship," and I was puzzled by this. Over the years, though, this problem has become more focused for me. I began to pay attention to how people used the word "worship," and I sensed that we have a peculiar, isolated, narrow understanding of this word, one that is not shared with

the history of the Church, nor with the whole counsel of Scripture.

I think most people take the word “worship” to mean an emotional state that is brought about by focusing on God and his wonderful character. In this sense, many regard music as being especially helpful in allowing them to “worship.” We call the time that we are together right now a “worship” service. If we were honest about it, we would judge how “good” the service is this morning by how much and for how prolonged a time we were in the emotional state that we identify as “worship.”

But I could never achieve the kind of feeling I heard others talking about. For me, the times when I felt, on a purely emotional level, close to God were occasions when I was alone, particularly times spent in the mountains or forests. For me, achieving this state meant getting away from people. There was no way I could “worship” in a room filled with four hundred distractions—I mean, people!

In addition, from my knowledge of church history I knew that there was no evidence for a time set aside for “worship” in the NT church; and there is no evidence that instrumental music played any role in gatherings of the earliest Christians. The reference in Ephesians 5:19, of addressing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, is often taken in support of “music in church,” but the passage has to be distorted to make it appear that way. At most, that text reveals that music played an audible role in how the earliest Christians communicated with one another in all contexts, not just the times when the local body gathered together.

The early church did not use instrumental music in its gatherings and ceremonies, because there were all kinds of connections in Greek and Roman society between music and driving away demons. Most pagan ceremonies used music, especially music played by the flute, to drive away evil spirits. The early church wanted to avoid the connection between pagan worship and music, and so avoided the use of instruments altogether in its ceremonies and gatherings. There is some evidence that congregational singing, always *a cappella*, was practiced in second century church gatherings, and perhaps even a little earlier. I am convinced that were it not for the abundant example of singing and the use of musical instruments in the OT, the early church would have eliminated entirely the use of musical instruments in Christian music, and we would have no use for instruments today.

For many years my reaction therefore, after studying the NT especially, was to simply look down my nose at people who defined worship as an emotionally-based thing. After all, look at Romans 12:2, where worship is defined primarily in intellectual and moral terms, as a transforming of the mind. But I have grown up a little in the last year or so, thanks in large part to the discussions among the elders as we have sought God’s leading in our search for a worship pastor. This has been hard for me. But I have been sharpened, as iron sharpens iron, by the wisdom of my brothers.

What I now see is that we need today a complementing of our primarily emotionally-based understanding of worship. Thankfully, Micah 6:1-8 provides this complement. This morning we will find that worship consists as much in acts of service as it does in praise and emotional focus on God. From the perspective of the book of Micah, we will find that the prophet’s words are God’s answer to the question: What is worship?

The Courtroom of God: Announcing the Case

Before we answer this question we need to understand the context of Micah 6:1-8. In 6:1-2, Micah, as God’s spokesman, opens with a call to a dramatic courtroom scene in which God will contend with his people, Israel:

**Hear now what the Lord is saying:
“Arise, plead your case before the mountains,
And let the hills hear your voice.
Listen you mountains, to the indictment of the Lord,
And you enduring foundations of the earth,
Because the Lord has a case against His people;**

Even with Israel He will dispute. (6:1-2)

Here is a startling picture of God as Judge and Plaintiff, Micah as Prosecutor, Mountains as Witnesses, and Israel as the Accused, the Defendant. How compelling this is, especially Micah’s calling upon the mountains and the foundations of the earth as witnesses to God’s complaint and judgment against his people. For it is the mountains that God created as the original witnesses when Israel stood divided on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal and God spoke, for the first time in the Promised Land, the covenant words of curse and blessing. From the beginning, then, the mountains had been witnesses to God’s covenant with Israel. That is why God has Micah call upon the mountains as the sure witnesses that any violation of the covenant would not be excused because of a plea of ignorance.

Does anything about this strike you as odd? Here we have a suburban shepherd, using legal metaphors to express the word of the Lord that had come to him. Why the legal metaphor? I can think of others. A friend of mine who is a farmer told me once that on occasion, one has to use violent means to change a donkey’s behavior. Donkeys, of course, are stubborn beasts. My friend told me of a farmer who hit a donkey over the head with a piece of two by four—and that was just to get its attention!

The comparison to how God has to get our attention is obvious. Sometimes a personal catastrophe must intervene before God gets us to pay heed. We are just like that stubborn donkey. No wonder then, that one of the most spiritually sensitive men in history, Francis of Assisi, referred to his physical body as “Brother Ass.” So, Micah could have used an approach like that: “Look out, God is coming, and he’s mad. All leaders in Jerusalem are going to get spanked.”

The legal metaphor, however, gives Micah a couple of things. First, it allows him to communicate to Israel their sin in an area in which they are sinning. The legal system of Judah had become corrupt, favoring the rich against the poor. By using a legal metaphor, Micah challenges sinners on their own ground. In addition, a legal metaphor is appropriate to the covenantal nature of God’s relationship with his people.

The Courtroom of God: The Charge

Let us then answer the summons and enter into the courtroom with guilty Israel. We can almost hear the hush, for we know that the Divine Judge and Plaintiff is about to speak. But when God speaks, we don’t get an angry scolding. Instead we hear, in verses 3-5, the words of a Grieved Lover:

**“My people, what have I done to you,
And how have I wearied you? Answer me.
Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt
And ransomed you from the house of slavery,
And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.
My people, remember now
What Balak king of Moab counseled
And what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
And from Shittim to Gilgal,
In order that you might know the righteous acts of the Lord.**

The Judge does not call a witness. Instead, he turns to Israel and twice addresses him as “My people”—a term of endearment. What a loving God! Even as he enters the court to preside over the losing case of the defendant, he is seeking him out in love, reminding Israel of how much he cares for him.

But we get more than an emotional response here. Yahweh asks questions, forcing Israel to look back over the past and understand how faithfully they had been treated for hundreds of years: miracles in Egypt; freedom from slavery; strong and righteous leadership; conquests over enemies in the physical and spiritual realm from one end of the wilderness to the other—all because of God’s loyal love and righteous character. In what way, Yahweh pleads, has this been a trouble or a burden to Israel?

I won’t stop here to describe each of the references that Micah makes in this passage. To read Exodus and Deuteronomy is to know them. Besides, the history lesson we need this morning is not an outward, but an inward one. And the lesson is about to

become intensely personal.

The Courtroom of God: The Defense

Finally, the defendant speaks, in verses 6-7:

**With what shall I come to the Lord
And bow myself before the God on high?
Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings,
With yearling calves?
Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams,
In ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I present my first-born for my rebellious acts,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (6:6-7)**

Here, Micah gives a clear picture of the utter inadequacy of any human response to God. The prophet reveals that we cannot compensate God for our spiritual rebellion by any physical act, because the issue cannot be resolved on the physical level.

Bruce Waltke has an extremely insightful comment on this passage. He writes:

Instead of responding to such a wonderful Lord with loving and obedient hearts, Micah's generation transformed the covenant into a contract... [Israel] seeks to establish the price that will win God's favour by raising the bid even higher. Holocausts? One-year-old calves (already more costly)? Thousands of rams? Myriads of torrents of oil? Or, the highest price of all, the cruel sacrifice of a child? He can bid no higher. Outwardly he appears spiritual as he bows before the Most High with gift in hand. But his insulting questions betray a desperately wicked heart. Blinded to God's goodness and character, he reasons within his own depraved frame of reference. He need not change; God must change. He compounds his sin of refusing to repent by suggesting that God, like man, can be bought.

The Courtroom of God: The Decision

So the stage is now set for the famous words of Micah 6:8. In the hush of the courtroom, God has appealed to history and recounted his hundreds of years of loyal love and righteous acts. Israel has been led to see that no physical act of sacrifice can respond adequately to this love. The Prosecutor, Micah, steps forward, and asks the rhetorical question which closes the case, the question which summarizes the covenantal relationship between God and man:

**He has told you, O Man, what is good;
And what does the Lord require of you
But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)**

And as I studied this passage I remember feeling that finally I had come to the bottom line. Here, at last, is a clear statement of what God expects of me. Here, in my pointed little head, I thought I would find the contract with God that I could slip comfortably into. But a study of what the Hebrew word for "require" means stopped me dead in my tracks. The idea behind the word means "to seek something out in someone." So the opening line to this famous passage does not mean, "What, ultimately, is the end of the bargain I must keep with God? What do I have to do to enter God's presence and worship Him?" What it means is, "What is it that the Lord longs to find in me when I want to worship and bow down before him?" God supplies the initiative and passion, and I am left with needing to respond, appreciate, and express gratitude for the wonderful thing he has done in graciously letting me enter into a relationship with him.

Now that I know I have not entered into a contract, but into a relationship, and that in that relationship God seeks out certain qualities in me, it is appropriate to ask: What are those qualities? What is it that God wants to see when I come to bow down before him? Now the famous words take on a freshness I had missed when I wanted to view these verses as "my end of the bargain": do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Let's briefly look at these three phrases in turn.

Do Justice

The word Micah uses for "justice" here is a common Hebrew term. It means what it means in English, although I am afraid

that today we have perverted the idea of justice to mean that everyone has an equal right to have everything all the time. God's justice, though, is based on love for individuals and their unique needs. Micah usually reserves the word for contrasting how the leaders of Jerusalem treated people versus how a godly man would treat them: the leaders of the Hebrews do not "know" justice: they are exploitative and evil. Micah, on the other hand, a man who experiences God's indwelling and power, says he will act justly and so announce Israel's sin to his face. Ultimately, justice is seen as coming from the hand of God. For those who sorrow over their sin, it is deliverance. For those who do not repent and see their own evil, it is the crushing weight of Yahweh's vengeance

To "do justice" is something that Micah was very concerned about, and something that was not happening in his world. Twists, perversions, secrets, indirectness—these are all anathema to Micah's sense of justice. For him, the man who does justice does not hide things; he keeps short accounts; he sees all men and women, no matter their wealth, health, giftedness or social position, as children of God. People who "do justice" are guileless, honest, aware of their own brokenness.

Love Kindness

To fully explore the notion of "loving kindness," as the NASB translators have it, would take all morning. That is a weak translation. In his series in 2 Samuel, Brian Morgan said that the word used here, *chesed*, is the theological word of the OT. It means loyal love, and is the entire basis for how God views us. God has made promises to us, and he is bound by his holy character to keep those promises forever. Therefore, God wants us to love loyal love. He wants us to be excited and passionate about keeping our promises and honoring our commitments.

I found it intimidating to look at this example of God's loyal love for standards that I would be encouraged to follow. So I took my view down a notch and looked at models in the OT where loyal love is said to have been practiced between human beings. Two occasions that are helpful are the times when:

Joseph asked Pharaoh's cup bearer to show him loyal love and remember him after he had gotten out of prison;

David is grateful to the men of Jabesh-Gilead for the loyal love they showed to Saul and Jonathan when, in a daring midnight raid, they rescued the corpses of their one-time king and his son from disgrace and gave them a proper burial.

Loyal love practiced between human beings reveals a sense of loyalty, devotion, and fair play. Seen in ourselves, then, loyal love is, first of all, a complete devotion to God, based on having entered into an exclusive, promise-based relationship with him. God has been faithful, and more than faithful, to me, so I can do nothing other than be faithful to him. And then, because God seeks this quality in all men, I am commanded to turn and love others. The loyal love I can show them is to approach them with decency and fairness: it is living out the Golden Rule; it is treating my spoken word to someone as a public and sacred commitment; it is remembering the acts of kindness shown to me, and longing to return these in kind. People who love loyal love are thoughtful, kind, fair, and faithful.

Walk Humbly with God

Finally, Micah reveals that God longs for us to walk *humbly* with him. This is an interesting combination of words. There is a strong verbal echo between Micah 6:8 and Deuteronomy 10:12: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require from you, but to hear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul."

Micah introduces a subtle difference here. We are to walk humbly with God. There is debate among Hebrew scholars about just exactly what this word "humbly" means. Some see it as merely echoing Deuteronomy and emphasizing how we must live in conformity to God's law. Others see it as connected to a sense of lowliness of spirit as we approach God. To me, the balance is tipped in favor of the latter interpretation when we re-

member the larger context of this portion of Micah. Micah is talking about how we worship God, how we can come before him. Of course, we will want to conform our will to his, but I think even more we will be overwhelmed by his love and goodness and will understand ourselves to be unimaginably beneath him.

Back to the Question of Worship

Micah's dramatic poetry has a powerful logic to it: God's faithfulness to Israel has been publicly and undeniably obvious over hundreds of years; and no physical response is adequate to repair a breach on Israel's part in this covenantal relationship. So if Israel wants to be restored to God, let him remember God's loyal love, and from this remembrance, treat men with justice and faithfulness, never forgetting the humble position he has with God his Father.

With this logic in mind, we are ready to come back to the question of worship. Micah 6:1-2, the verses in which God uses Micah to summon Israel into court, remind us that when it comes to our relationship with God, he is the initiator. Because God is faithful to his promise, because he practices *chesed*, he will relentlessly pursue us, even when we have gone astray. His pursuit of us, though, may not be pleasant. God's calling us into "court" may mean that terrible things will happen until he gets our full attention. God loves us enough to discipline us.

Micah 6:3-5 teaches us that our ability to come before God and bow down, to worship the Most High, comes from a sense of history. The parallel to my own heart is obvious. As I look back over my life, I also see the loyal love and righteous acts of God: loving parents; comfort in times of danger; withdrawal of things I have loved too much; a tender drawing together of circumstances to keep me from disaster; easy access to fabulous teaching and faithful friends; every physical need met and more than met; a wife of goodness and mercy who loves and forgives, who knows and cares; the blessing of an increasingly full quiver: wonderful and challenging children who keep me on my knees. And yet I am just like Israel: I grow weary of God; I forget, and I imagine that I have done good things on my own; I respond more favorably to those who speak well of me; I hedge on my commitments; I grow blind and stupid. And yet, wonderfully, God keeps calling me, even bringing me into court to get my attention.

I believe that this is where worship starts. And, in some ways, it is here that it ends. Worship is, in part, the simple remembrance of the truth that all has come from God and nothing from me; that without him I can do nothing; that I am a stinking corpse apart from him. And then, when I realize what he has done for me, I am overcome with emotion because my mind has finally seen things as they really are—from his perspective. If only we could hold onto those moments forever. Can you imagine it? To constantly keep in mind God's perspective of oneself. Such would be the beginning of true worship.

But don't let me beg the question. What, after all, is worship? Micah asks this very question in 6:6. How is it that we can come to the Lord and bow down before God on high? As I said earlier, the OT notion is clear: a combination of the ideas of being prostrate and of serving.

The problem lies in our deeply human tendency to try to do things for God, to pay him back for what he has done for us. That is what Micah 6:7 is saying. But there is nothing we can do to pay God back for his mercy. That mercy is infinite, divine, unreachable by mere human effort.

So the only thing left is Micah 6:8. Out of a heart of gratitude, we will do justice, be passionate about loyal love, and we will walk humbly with God. Micah's poetic logic is wonderfully clear: worship begins with gratitude. Worship avoids the perverse notion that we can bring anything to the table when entering into relationship with God. Worship springs into action from a heart of continuing gratitude. It causes us to be fair and honest with our fellow man, to keep our promises, and live out the Golden

Rule. And finally, true worship is an endless passionate circle. It is the constant reminder of who we are, who God is, the distance between us, and the humbling fact that only God can bridge the gap we are disgraced to know is there. In the end, worship is gratitude in action.

I believe that the American church has slipped into accepting the first half of the definition while ignoring the second: gratitude *in action*. We can't just sing songs of praise and express gratitude in church. We can't just feel good about being close to a God who loves us infinitely. We need to move out in humble obedience to a world that does not yet know the Relentless Pursuer of Heaven. The message of Micah is that if we are going to err on one side or the other on the question of worship, we ought to err on the side of understanding worship as acts of service and obedience rather than as expressions of praise and adoration. Wouldn't you rather have obedience and acts of loyal love and justice from your own children than mere expressions of these things? Of course, the best thing is to have both. But if we can have only one, we know in our hearts which is more important.

So you might ask yourself some questions this morning:

Do you "do justice"? At work, are your practices straightforward and honest? Do you speak the truth clearly and directly? Do you confront the people around you with passion, love, and integrity?

Do you love "loyal love"? What is your attitude toward the vows you spoke to your spouse on your wedding day? Have you promised to do something with your children and not carried through? Have you put stakes in the ground that publicly announce your deepest commitments, obligations, and promises?

Do you walk humbly with God? Are your day to day words and actions representative of a heart, mind, and soul that realizes how God in compassion and mercy has bridged the gap between himself and you?

To do all of these is to worship God. These are the things that God wants as we bow before him on Sunday morning, Tuesday afternoon, and Friday in the evening. And I cannot stress enough that this is not the law. It is gratitude in action. We do these things because we are compelled to by gratitude to a God who has saved us in his mercy.

As we contemplate the words of Micah we know that we fail miserably. We don't comprehend how we can be given God's loyal love when we do not deserve it. We fear making a public commitment to a God who acts faithfully in history. We engage in religious activity as a cover for hearts barren of gratitude, much less gratitude in action. Knowing our frailty, let us not forget the words that close the book of Micah:

**Who is a God like Thee, who pardons iniquity
And passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of His possession?**

**He does not retain His anger forever,
Because he delights in loyal love.
He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities underfoot.
Yes, Thou wilt cast all their sins
Into the depth of the sea.**

**Thou wilt give truth to Jacob
And loyal love to Abraham,
Which Thou didst swear to our forefathers
From the days of old. (7:18-20)**

Dedication

When I was in high school, a very small group of Christian friends gathered together at my parents' house and we studied the Book of Micah together. To these friends: Paul Van Maanen, Ed Chan, and Christy Hale (now Christy Apostolou), I dedicate this morning's teaching.

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