

## What God Wants from Us

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers  
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,  
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Micah 6:1-8  
Matthew 5:1-12

What does God want from us? That is the question I'd like to consider today. Often, I think we come to church with a different question: what do we want from God? We come seeking healing and hope, love and acceptance, comfort, inspiration, guidance. We want many things from God. But what does God want from us? That's the question raised in this morning's scripture passage from the prophet Micah.

It's a complicated passage. It combines at least two types of literature – a lawsuit speech and a dialogue about sacrificial offerings. And it includes at least three different speakers – the prophet, God, and an anonymous individual presumably representing Israel. There is a lot going on in this passage and therefore a lot to sort out. So, I want to do something I don't normally do, and that is go through the passage verse by verse. You can follow along on the screens.

The language used by the prophet Micah in the first two verses is that of the cosmic courtroom. God is taking Israel to court. The mountains and the foundations of the earth are judge and jury. We hear the language of a lawsuit, modeled after the legal practices of ancient Israel.

“Hear what the Lord says: Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.”

In verses 3 through 5, the voice and audience both change. God is speaking here in the first person to God's people. God demands to know what he has done to weary his people. God wants to know why they have tired of him: "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!"

God recounts his saving acts in behalf of Israel from the exodus from Egypt to the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land, as if to say, "Look at all I've done for you!" God reminds the people that they were liberated from Egypt, freed from slavery, and that God sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to lead them. God calls upon the people to remember "what King Balak of Moab devised" and "what Balaam son of Beor answered him." [It is assumed that the listeners know the story of Balak and Balaam found in Numbers 22-24. King Balak wanted Balaam to curse Israel, but instead, Balaam blessed Israel as God had commanded.] And then there was "what happened from Shittim to Gilgal," which refers to the Israelites crossing of the Jordan River into the Promised Land. [Shittim was the last place the Israelites camped before reaching the Jordan (Joshua 3:1) and Gilgal was the first place they camped after crossing the Jordan (Joshua 4:19).] God's people are to remember these "saving acts" of God.

Following God's speech, there is another major transition at verses 6 and 7. Here an individual speaks in the first person. This individual may very well be intended to represent Israel. The speaker, we learn at the end of verse 7, has committed some sin or "transgression" and is seeking atonement. He asks a series of questions that escalate in their intensity. He wants to know what kind of offering he should bring in paying homage to God. What kind of offering would most please God? The setting very much resembles that of a layperson asking a Temple priest for instruction about which sacrifice will be adequate to atone for his sin.

The speaker raises five possibilities, each one grander than the next. Should he bring "burnt offerings," referring to the sacrifice of animals in which the animals' entire bodies are consumed by

fire. Should he sacrifice “calves a year old?” [Presumably, this would be considered a higher quality offering, since calves as young as eight days old were acceptable for sacrifice (Lev. 22:27).] In verse 7 the speaker ups the ante further, quickly reaching the level of absurdity: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams?” What about ten thousand rivers of oil? All these questions! All these possibilities! The questioner sounds stressed out to me. He’s really worried about this. What will he have to do to get right with God? What does God want from him? His final possibility is to sacrifice his own child: “Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” This goes beyond all legal possibilities provided by Jewish law.

The passage concludes with verse 8, one of the best-known verses in Micah and one of my favorite passages in the entire Bible. The prophet addresses the questioner. But since the questioner may represent Israel as a whole, the audience here may be intended to be more universal – all the people of Israel or even all of humanity. Verse 8 is supposed to be a response to the questioner, but it doesn’t answer the questions raised previously in any direct way. It says nothing about what kinds of offerings would be an acceptable sacrifice. Rather, verse 8 answers the question “what is good?” The prophet says that God has already told you what is “good” and what God “requires of you,” as if to say, “Don’t worry so much. It’s simple, really. You already know what I want from you.” “Do justice,” “love kindness,” and “walk humbly with your God.”

There are any number of events that could have caused Israel to grow weary of or flag in its faithfulness to God. The fall of Samaria to Assyria in 721 B.C.E. might have led Israel to feel insecure about God’s protection. Likewise, the first siege of Jerusalem by the Assyrians in 701 B.C.E. might have shaken Israel’s faith. Or a century later, the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. followed by the Babylonian exile could very well have been the occasion for the assembling of Micah 6:1-8. Whatever the occasion, Israel acted in such a way that God felt the need to remind his people of the extraordinary things he had done for

them and of the little that he wanted in return. It appears that God didn't care so much about sacrificial offerings. What God cares most about is how people live together in the world. God wants to see us acting justly toward one another. God wants to see us offering the love of kindness to one another. God wants us to walk in his ways, to live attentively with him. This central message of Micah 6:1-8 – of placing right and ethical conduct above the issue of sacrificial offerings – is shared by a number of other prophets, including Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah.

As one biblical scholar put it, "it's you, not something, God wants." "So at a profound level the answer does call for sacrifice, but a kind quite different from that proposed by the question. It is not sacrifice of something outside a person which can be objectified as a means to deal with God. It is rather a yielding of life itself to God and his way, 'repentance' of the most radical sort. What God requires is not the life of some thing, but the living of the [person] who stands before him."

This text is a powerful one for Christians as well as Jews. We Christians also have much for which to be thankful. Among God's saving acts for us – for the whole world – is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How shall we respond to God's gift of grace to us? Shall we build cathedrals and organs and other monuments to our God? Shall we give away all that we have and live voluntarily in poverty? God has already told us what is good and what he requires of us. It is simple, though it may not be easy – do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

This is reflected also in our passage from Matthew, in the sayings of Jesus known as the Beatitudes, which introduce Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. They are addressed most directly to Jesus' disciples, to the Christian community, but presumably the crowd is listening in as well. If you've ever seen the Monty Python movie, "The Life of Brian," this is the scene where a few people at the back of the crowd can't hear very well, and begin asking each other: "Did he say: 'Blessed are the cheese makers?'"

The crowds who first heard Jesus' words were "astounded at his teaching." I, too, am astounded by his words. They are wise and wonderful. They are powerful and provocative. Jesus "taught them as one having authority," as he teaches all of us. Jesus' words are weighty. They carry divine authority. They draw us in and challenge us at the same time. They are radical in that they get at the root of Christian living. They rouse us from our comfort and complacency. They push us to go deeper in our faith and to grow in our discipleship. Perhaps that's why I am drawn to the Sermon on the Mount more than any other part of the Bible, and why I'll be preaching on it over the next few weeks, following the lectionary.

Each of the Beatitudes begins with the word "Blessed," which can also be translated "Happy" or "Fortunate" or "Honored." How is the prophet Micah reflected in these statements? Well those who "do justice" are "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Those who "love kindness" are those who are "merciful." Those who "walk humbly with God" are the "meek" and the "poor in spirit." How happy are they! How fortunate! How honored!

This message is profoundly counter-cultural. It goes contrary to the dominant values of our society, just as it did in Jesus' day. Our culture honors the strong, the wealthy, the powerful, not the poor, the meek, and the merciful. And just as in Jesus' day, we risk ostracism and persecution by being part of a counter-cultural community. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Under God's reign, the dominant values of our society are turned upside down. Jesus is saying blessed are those who live his teachings now, even if it seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God.

So, there's no need to fret, no need to worry – even at such a time as this! What God wants from us is simple, even if it's not always easy: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.”  
May it be so. Amen.