

STUDY 1

Micah Speaks

He has shown you, O mortal 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. – Micah 6:8

The sixth minor prophet Micah was both a prophet of doom and hope as he prophesied about the future judgment to descend upon both Samaria and Judah. He is most famously known for predicting the exact town where the Christ would be born (Micah 5:2). In his prophecies he announced coming judgment upon Israel for their social evils, corrupt leadership and idolatry.

But even in the midst of his strongest warnings to Judah, Micah includes the hope that God will relent on the promised judgment if they will turn from evil. In this well-known refrain above he speaks on behalf of God.

Point 1. We need reminders of our own brief mortality.

As with great swathes of most humanity, it can be very easy to be obsessed and consumed with our own existences, needs, desires and wants. But in the midst of living out our lives the prophet reminds us that it is all very temporary. We are in fact mortal—with a very limited shelf life.

Keeping that in mind there are two objectives: One, make the time we have here count to the best of our ability; and, Two, because we are mortal we need to focus on actions that can achieve long-term, eternal results.

Discussion: In what ways can you and those closest to you continue to remind each other to keep mortality in view?

Point 2. Listening up.

My father was a big man with a dominant personality. A former military policeman in the Korean Conflict and owner of a construction company, he tended to give instruction one time and expect it to be heeded, whether to his children or his employees. I learned that early on in life and though I experienced a few painful bumps of my own causing I learned about heeding instructions which served me well when I came into the Christian faith and then into leadership.

How much more should we heed when Scripture says something compelling like “the Lord require of you?” Personal autonomy and freedom are highly prized possessions of Western Culture so we sometimes chafe at being “required” to carry out an order, but God is quite clear what He requires.

Point 3. Finding the holy balance.

As God spells out His requirements that we “act justly and love mercy,” we can immediately see how these two requirements have the potential to quickly be at odds with each other. We can “act justly” and say this is what the person deserves and make sure consequences and “punishments” are meted out and neglect the latter part of “love mercy.” We can “love mercy” and not be involved with the behavioral and societal change needed to “act justly.”

Discussion: Some of the drug programs in larger cities have focused on providing supplies to help the homeless obtain drugs and not get out of their living situation. Where does this fit in the “act justly and love mercy” continuum?

Discussion: What are some of the laws in your municipality or state that are inhibiting churches and non-profits from acting justly and loving mercy?

Point 4. Humility must characterize our delivery.

As we follow God’s commands to deliver justice and mercy where He has planted us, He also adds another layer: humility.

This past week I literally sat next to a demoniac. One of our staff members came a bit frantically into my office while I was on a Zoom meeting and said, “We need you!” A woman was outside our offices shrieking with an other-worldly howl and two of my employees were quite unnerved. I walked over to the area where she was and as I engaged her, I sat down on the curb fairly close to where she was sitting. Just the act of getting to her level immediately calmed her down. She had obvious severe mental health issues as she claimed to be Jesus Christ and many other profane things but even in this extreme situation humility was the best approach.

As we prayerfully begin addressing needs in our own areas, let’s also plan to not position our mindset as we are the superiors doing this, but remembering “except for the grave of God therefore go I.”

Discussion: Based upon this passage from Micah, what could God conceivably point out in our country today where we need to act justly, love mercy, and also walk humbly before God?

STUDY 2

Isaiah Speaks

Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—when you see the naked, to clothe them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? – Isaiah 58:7

Probably no other book in the Old Testament more clearly points to the Messiah than that of the major prophet Isaiah. Isaiah not only opens his book with a great revelation of the holiness of God but throughout the book provides numerous messianic predictions and descriptions.

Various forms of fasting throughout the Bible have been a venue for humans to seek a closer relationship with God. The 58th chapter of his book lays out for God-followers a very clear type of results-oriented fasting that was pleasing to God.

Point 1. Recognize and respond to immediate needs.

Food is an immediate need. Hunger happens pretty quickly. In fact, after missing just one or two meals a person is beginning to experience hunger pangs. Hunger is an immediate need that needs to be satisfied fairly quickly or bodily changes can begin happening such as being more prone to infections, blood sugar changes, fatigue and other symptoms.

Isaiah reminds his readers that the physical food they possess should be shared with the hungry. Period. There are no qualifiers in this statement. We are to share our food.

Discussion: What are you and your church doing for food needs in your community?

Point 2. God cares about family and individual stability.

Shelter gives a sense of permanence with it. Whether a motel, a home, or an apartment. Many a person has been grateful for even a tent to sleep in and shelter from the elements.

This week I received a call from a former resident of our drug and alcohol shelter for men who was in a desperate plight. He had lost his job, his home and that night his pregnant wife slept on a sidewalk and he himself stayed up all night so no one would molest her. They were desperate for shelter and we were able to respond to that need.

The movie documents the challenging true story of acquiring shelter for homeless families. Recognizing the challenge in 2007 of spiraling unemployment and homelessness the church embarked on a mission to answer the shelter need.

Discussion: What are ways in your community you can assist in responding to the need for safe shelter?

Point 3. Help others avoid shame.

Those of us who have been in ministry for any length of time have experienced this response from inviting an unchurched person to church, “But I don’t have anything to wear.”

I don’t want to get into a church attire debate other than to say clothing matters to people.

And typically this is a pretty easy need to address when desiring to help people.

Action step: Take a look at your own closet. What could be used to glorify God in helping others?

God has a reason in including clothing in His commands. The outward attire matters to most people, and probably more acutely with the needy.

The Pregnancy and Family Resource Center at First Baptist Leesburg sees annually about 50 babies per year saved from death through abortion. That in itself is a Christ-honoring feat. But another remarkable action the center takes is maintaining a closet of wedding dresses. In helping single girls and women who have a desire to get married to their current boyfriend or even a future one if abandoned, the church wants them to feel special on their wedding day and provides them a wedding dress free of charge.

Discussion: What can your church or small group do to help meet clothing needs in your community?

Point 4. “They” is “us” should be our frame of thinking.

Those in our community that are in desperate need are “us.” They may not share the same last name. They may speak a different language. They may have a different level of melanin. They may have very different cultural tastes. But make no mistake, they are flesh and blood as we.

In the movie “No Vacancy” a black woman Janet drives up to the church to deliver a check to help purchase the motel. She states, “Pastor, when I read that article in the *Orlando Sentinel* I decided to treat these homeless children like they were my very own.”

Discussion: What can we do individually, what can we do as a church, to “not turn away from our own flesh and blood?”

STUDY 3

Wisdom Speaks

Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will reward them for what they have done. – Proverbs 19:17

Kindness to the poor is doing business with God.

One of the more dramatic scenes in the movie takes place after the church decided to purchase the motel. Provision and resources arrived in a myriad of ways in time to make the shelter a reality.

Discussion: What ways have you seen God provide in unexpected ways for a ministry to help other people?

Discussion: When we focus on meeting the needs of others how does that help (or hinder) fundraising efforts?

It is a sin to despise one's neighbor, but blessed is the one who is kind to the needy. – Proverbs 14:21

Point 2. Remember the Good Samaritan.

One day a religious leader asked the question “Who is my neighbor?” to Jesus that sparked one of the most famous answers and illustrations in the Bible—that of the Good Samaritan. The interesting thing about this illustration is that it was the religious people who bypassed the injured person in crisis. The person viewed as an outcast was the one who delivered help to the injured person.

Discussion: What are ways that churches today can fall in the same trap of being religious but yet missing the person needing attention?

Discussion: What are ways individuals or communities might “despise” their neighbors?

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy. – Proverbs 31:8-9

Point 3. The strong help the weak.

Every year I join with the volunteers at our Pregnancy and Family Resource Center in Life Chain, where we join with the Catholic church down the road from us and form a long chain along U.S. 27 encouraging people to stand for life.

Whether babies in the womb or vulnerable children or teens, the church is admonished in Scripture to be one of the voices in our nation speaking for those “who cannot speak for themselves.”

Discussion: What ways do you think God may be leading you to be a voice for the voiceless?

Discussion: Where has the church, whether historical or contemporary, been successful at speaking up for the voiceless, and concurrently where have we failed in this endeavor?

Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God. – Proverbs 14:31

4. Remembering Creation is a part of keeping the right focus.

I received a late afternoon call from the director of our Women’s Care Center. One of the ladies she was working with had two young children and her car needed repairs for her to keep her job.

Her landlord agreed to help her with the \$200 if she would sleep with him in exchange for rent and she could repair her car and keep her job. Of course, if I didn’t do any other business that day, I guaranteed the director we would find the money to take care of her car so she could provide for her kids and keep her job (and her self-respect).

The Bible uses a very strong word here in the word contempt. This landlord, like many others, show contempt for the Creator God that made both himself and the woman he was trying to use for ungodly purposes.

As you or your church become more involved in addressing the deep needs of your community you will run into situations similar to this where people are trying to take advantage of the poor and the needy. Make yourself available to God to be able to step in where there is a desperate need.

Discussion: How does seeing God as our Maker influence us in caring about and thinking of the needs of others?

STUDY 4

Jesus Speaks

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." – Matthew 25:34-36

Point 1. Jesus is the King we serve when we help others.

Bible scholars and teachers are not in complete agreement of who Jesus is addressing when he uttered these words. Because it occurs at the judgment of the nations, some think it for those who assisted believers during the difficult times of the Tribulation. Some would apply it to the nation of Israel. Others claim this is towards all needy people in general.

What all can agree on is that these who have rendered these services have demonstrated evidence of saving faith in their service to others. And these are all individuals highly commended by Jesus Christ himself.

We were a bunch of kids hanging around eagerly waiting for autographs. The pro golfers were finishing their rounds in Orlando and walking out of the scoring tent. Some of the men were very gracious about signing autographs for young kids but others—let's just say—less than gracious. Even though I was only ten or eleven at the time, I realized "royalty" and the "famous" were not all they were made out to be. But what a difference the day comes when we actually meet royalty. In fact, royalty already gives us instructions of what we should do in advance of the reception.

Discussion: What are the differences between a socially driven assistance to others and one driven by a faith-based perspective such as Matthew 25?

Point 2. We often don't recognize the immediate impact of our help.

One of the more fascinating aspects of this future fulfillment of this Scripture is the *surprise* of the people to whom Christ commends for their care for others. They were simply doing what was best for others who were in need and then Christ takes back the veil and boom! Here is what you actually have done. You were looking after Christ.

Discussion: Who was a needy, hurting or disenfranchised individual whom you recently helped? What went through your mind as you were doing this?

Point 3. Assistance to others is never wasted or forgotten.

Even though our small town and county got quite a bit of positive press when the “No Vacancy” movie was being shot in Lake County, Florida, and being released into theaters, our county is also well known for something else. The Pulitzer Prize winning book *Devil in the Grove: Thurgood Marshall, the Groveland Boys, and the Dawn of a New America* documents events that took place here several decades earlier in our county. It is embarrassing (and sickening) to residents in our county of what took place here with the racism, violence and injustice. It is a stain that doesn’t seem will ever go away and is remembered with great disgust.

The similarities between the “No Vacancy” movie and the Pulitzer Prize winning book is that both cover events that will long be remembered. With the book and the planned motion picture, *Devil in the Grove*, the sordid events the book covered will both be long remembered. However, the other actual events of the kind actions of the car dealer who provided a work truck, the drug counselor, the pastor, as well as other true people portrayed in the movie will be remembered throughout eternity.

The kingdom that the King promises here has long been prepared. It sounds lavish beyond what we can conceive. Let’s all be prepared for when we go to meet royalty.

Discussion: What images and emotions are invoked when you think of individually standing in front of a king who will evaluate his subjects?

Point 4. We take our clues from the needs around us.

One day I received a call from a pastor in another state who had heard about what were doing in Leesburg and he wanted to pick my brain a little about what his church could do in their area. I asked him to share a little about his church situation (every church and community is unique) and let me know what he was thinking.

He shared that his state had the highest teen pregnancy rate in the nation. And his county had the highest teen pregnancy rate in the state. And that his church was located in the county seat and he had been praying about starting a pregnancy care center for teens and women. I didn’t think he quite realized what he was saying. I asked him if he was hearing himself; it seemed as though his words were speaking through a megaphone to him about the needs of his area. They did eventually open a center to begin addressing these raging needs in his city.

The point is we can learn much about what God may be directing us to do by the individual pressing needs of our community.

Discussion: As we close out this study, what are the top and most pressing needs of your community needing help?