

MICAH 6:6-8—GETTING TO THE HEART OF OLD TESTAMENT LAW (AND ITS GIVER)

Micah 6:1-8

- ¹ Listen to what the Lord says:
“Stand up, plead your case before the mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.
- ² Hear, O mountains, the LORD’s accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.
For the LORD has a case against his people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel.
- ³ “My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.
- ⁴ I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.
- ⁵ My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab counseled
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD.”
- ⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
- ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
- ⁸ He has showed you, O man, 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.

Introduction

Copious accolades have been showered upon Micah 6:6-8 over the years. For example: Von Rad contends, “This is the quintessence of the commandments as the prophets understood them”; Smith calls it “the finest summary of the content of practical religion to be found in the Old Testament”; and Boadt observes, “The rabbis who commented on this verse in the early centuries of the Christian era called it a one-line summary of the whole Law.”¹

¹As cited in Kenneth L. Barker and Waylon Bailey, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah*, The New American Commentary, vol. 20 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 113.

Why all this praise for such a terse and taxing text?

In a covenant lawsuit (רִיב, *rib*, Mic 6:1) against Israel, the prophet Micah recalls the gracious acts of God in history, leaving the people no excuse for their disloyalty to him. To the people's absurd offers of exorbitant sacrifices to pay for their rebellion and infidelity, the prophet indicates that what God *really* wants from them is **“to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God”** (Mic 6:8b).

Similar exhortations can be found throughout the prophets (cf. Isa 1:10-17, 29:13-14, 58:1-8; Jer 6:20; Hos 6:6; Joel 2:13; Amos 5:21-27; Zech 7:4-6). “Repeatedly the prophets lament the fact that Israel tried to substitute outward acts of piety for the necessary inward prerequisite for offering these gifts.”² This lamentation comes from the fact that God is *offended* when the “inward prerequisite” does not accompany external forms of worship.

Micah thus articulates in a pithy way the central message of all the prophets—a message that hearkens back to Samuel: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams” (1 Sam 15:22). From Micah 6:6-8, several important insights emerge concerning God and the nature and function of his law.

1. God is not pleased when his covenant people live unrighteous lives.

- a. In Micah 6:1-2a, God offers a triple invitation for his people to “hear” (שָׁמַע) his charge against them. The lawsuit is under way, and the mountains and foundations of the earth are called as witnesses (Mic 6:2). But the tone of these austere proceedings is not merely *legal*. For God, they are achingly *relational* as well: “O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you?” (Mic 6:3).
- b. God reminds his people that he has shown them nothing but love from the beginning of their history as a nation. He delivered them out of Egyptian slavery (Mic 6:4a); he gave them inspired leadership (Mic 6:4b); he gave them victory over their enemies in the desert (Mic 6:5a); and he led them into the Promised Land (Mic 6:5b). Note a similar pathos and recitation of divine goodness in Hosea 11:1-11.
- c. Each of these displays of God's grace should have brought Israel to a place of humility, confession, obedience, and righteousness. Yet she remains defiant, unfaithful, hard-hearted, and especially unsympathetic to the plight of the poor in her midst. Curiously (and incongruously), she also remains outwardly “religious.”

2. God cannot be “bought off” with sacrifices, no matter how expensive, to pay for unrighteous living.

- a. If Israel is guilty of violating the covenant, what can she do to remedy the situation? Micah puts the question into the mouth of an ordinary Israelite: “With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? (Mic 6:6a). He then proposes a series of sacrifices in “ascending order of extravagance calculated to exhaust the option of approach to God through sacrifice.”³
- b. First he asks, “Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?” (Mic 6:6b). While God did indeed prescribe the burnt (הִלֵּל) offering in Leviticus 1:1-17, such a sacrifice will not suffice here.
- c. But if God is not satisfied with *quality*, perhaps he will be satisfied with *quantity*: “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” (Mic 6:7a). The caricature is coming

²Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 7.

³James Luther Mays, *Micah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976),

into focus. Now there is a torrential flow of blood and oil to be offered up to God. Will *that* suffice? The implied answer is assuredly no.

- d. Exaggeration reaches its zenith in the final sacrifice proposed—one’s firstborn child: “Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Mic 6:7b). Here Micah takes his proposal beyond what is legal in Israel (Deut 18:10; Lev 18:21, 20:2-5) to that which is ultimately revolting (Judg 11:34; 2 Kgs 3:27, 16:3, 21:6; Jer 7:21, 19:5; Ezek 16:20, 20:26; Isa 57:5).
 - (1) “The idea behind this custom seems to have been that God would receive man’s dearest and best offering and, having received it, was under obligation to bless the offerer. Such an attitude showed that the people were willing to bargain with God as if he were a ‘petty’ merchant. They were ready to buy his favor as if he were some venal judge, blind to their wrongs if the price was right.”⁴
 - (2) Child sacrifice was supposed to be utterly forbidden in Israel. That it is even considered here likely illustrates the severely compromised state of Israel’s spirituality.
- e. “No!” is the expected answer to each suggested sacrifice, especially the last one. It is “the pillar of human delusion” to think that such sacrifices could restore man’s broken relationship with God.⁵ Thus the prophet proceeds to “overthrow these outward means of reconciliation with God, and reminds the people of the moral demands of the law.”⁶

3. God regards righteous living as more valuable than ceremonial living.

- a. The prophet begins the climax of his exhortation: “He has told [תִּנְיָה] you, O man, what is good . . .” (Mic 6:8a). Ignorance of what pleases God is no valid excuse, for he has *shown* his good ways on earth and *spoken* his good law from heaven, inscribing the first part of it on stone tablets, having the rest of it written in a book, and ordering all of it passed down orally from generation to generation through the covenant families of Israel.
- b. In the question, “And what does the LORD require of you but . . .” (Mic 6:8a), the participial form of “require” may indicate the perpetual, unchanging nature of what follows. Three central obligations for the covenant people are cited in Micah 6:8b:
 - (1) **“to do justice”** (עֲשׂוּת מִשְׁפָּט), which here likely means to do what is right in accordance with God’s law, especially as it pertains to personal integrity and defending the poor and the powerless;
 - (2) **“to love kindness”** (דֶּבַר חֶסֶד), which here likely means to recognize the needy and respond to their plight through tangible acts of assistance and a spirit of solidarity; and
 - (3) **“to walk humbly with your God”** (הִצְנַע לְפָנֵי יְהוָה), which here likely means a measured, careful, and attentive way of life before the Lord. It is a way of life that is “humble, not so much by self effacement, as by considered attention to another. The humility lies in not going one’s own way presumptuously, but in attending the will and way of God.”⁷

⁴T. Miles Bennett, *The Book of Micah: A Study Manual* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), 55.

⁵Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Micah*, ed. Paul D. Hanson with Loren Fisher, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 76.

⁶C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Minor Prophets*, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 496.

⁷Mays, *Micah*, 142.

- c. Sadly, Israel is prepared to pay any price and make any sacrifice except living a righteous life. But in the end, even “the most expensive and elaborate worship cannot compensate for the lack of justice.”⁸

4. God’s perfect law requires obedience, but it lacks the intrinsic power to produce that obedience.

- a. God’s law requires obedience and loyalty as expressed on two horizons—love and solidarity with one’s neighbor (i.e., fellow human beings) as well as with God himself (cf. 1 John 4:20-21). In fact, God rejects costly gifts as an acceptable means of atonement for sin and access into his presence. Rather, he demands justice that proceeds from a spiritual covenant.”⁹
- b. Micah points out that there is indeed something worse than appearing before the Lord empty-handed (cf. Exod 23:15, 34:20), viz., “appearing before him dirty-handed and empty-hearted, without justice. . . . External rites are valid only when they are an expression of internal convictions and not just empty and meaningless ritual.”¹⁰
- c. What, then, does God require? “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 Yahweh requires is not the life of some thing, but the living of the man who stands before him.”¹¹
- d. It is important to note, however, that the intention of Micah 6:1-8 is “not to debunk the cult, but to establish an order of priorities.”¹² And this it certainly does—again. God has always elevated his ethical commands over his cultic commands. “The prophets did not repudiate sacrifice but subordinated it to ethics.”¹³
- e. Moreover, in a dispute with the Pharisees, Jesus likewise distinguishes between lesser and weightier matters of the law (Matt 23:23; cf. Luke 11:42).
- f. Ultimately, Micah’s famous dictum highlights an important limitation of law. Keeping it partially, externally, mechanistically, or inattentively is not keeping it at all. In fact, what the law *really* lacks is “an inner source of motivation or something to compel me to achieve what it commands. While the whole essence of the law can be summarized in love, it cannot itself produce that love. Not that anything was deficient in the law itself, but there was a limitation because of the imperfection of men.”¹⁴
- g. The author of Hebrews concurs: “But God found fault *with the people* and said: ‘The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel’” (Heb 8:8, NIV, emphasis mine).

⁸Juan I. Alfaro, *Micah: Justice and Loyalty*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 67.

⁹Bruce K. Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 367.

¹⁰Alfaro, *Micah*, 67.

¹¹Mays, *Micah*, 142.

¹²William McKane, *The Book of Micah: Introduction and Commentary* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 191.

¹³Waltke, *Commentary on Micah*, 391.

¹⁴Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 36.