



This morning we begin a new series of messages titled The Great Commandments. We begin with a passage from the Old Testament prophet Micah, a passage which contains one of the most famous of all prophetic messages – *And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.* That’s a great verse to memorize, and if you like to mark favorite verses in your Bible, be sure and underline that one, mark it with a highlighter, and fold over the edge of the page so you can turn to it quickly.

After we complete this series we will move to a series called *I Love the Church*. I would appreciate your help on that series. If you would complete the sentence *I Love the Church Because...* I would appreciate hearing from you (I will not identify you in any of the comments I use). I would add that I’m not looking for comments such as *I love the church because I can get a 20-minute nap every week during the sermon.* If you do write that, I will be sure and identify you! One of the messages of that series will be titled *I Love the Church In Spite of...* That message will address not only the hurts that we sometimes experience in the life of the church, but also the accusations that are often leveled at churches, such as being full of hypocrites, etc.

This morning, as we begin our new series, we do so by acknowledging that the prophets were an amazing breed of people. While we generally think of the prophets as thundering out God’s judgment upon the people of Israel, they were far more than just pronouncers of divine judgment. The prophets fulfilled several functions, one of which was to speak the right word for the right moment. This meant that there were indeed times when they would be confrontational and judgmental, but there were other times when they were very comforting, gentle, and pastoral. Sometimes people need to be confronted, but not always. Sometimes people need to be comforted and they need pastoral care. The prophets knew what was needed, which is not always an easy task. The prophets were also called to speak the truth, even when doing so put them in danger. The classic example of this, to me, is when the prophet Nathan confronted King David over his affair with Bathsheeba and the subsequent action David took to ensure the death of her husband, Uriah. It was an incredibly bold move on the part of Nathan to make such a public accusation against the king, but he did so, in spite of the fact that it could have put his own life at risk. (*1The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. 2 The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, 3 but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. 4 “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of*

his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.” 5 David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! 6 He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.” 7 Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. 8 I gave your master’s house to you, and your master’s wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. 9 Why did you despise the word of the Lord by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. 10 Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.’ 11 “This is what the Lord says: ‘Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity on you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will sleep with your wives in broad daylight. 12 You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel.’” 13 Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against the Lord.” II Samuel 12:1-13).

I imagine that the prophets did not always want to be confrontational, but they were at times because it was a necessity, as it is today. Prophets fulfill the function of speaking truth, sometimes very hard truth, to the people that need to hear it, and it is often the people in power who need to hear those truths. I am not a prophet. I am a pastor; that is how I understand myself. But sometimes my role requires that I speak even the hard truths that I don’t want to speak. Not many people are able to effectively strike the balance of being prophetic and pastoral; generally speaking, we are one or the other. The prophets, however, were unique individuals in that they were able to be speak a prophetic word when necessary, but also be pastoral as the need presented itself.

In this week’s Scripture text we read of three commands that are offered by the prophet Micah – to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. It is interesting to note, I think, that these commands are action-oriented, that is, they are not commands about belief. Sometimes churches become so concerned about right belief we forget that Scripture has quite a bit to say about right action. I am not minimizing the importance of doctrine and belief, and it is a gift to us that we have 2,000 years of Christian theology upon which we can build a foundation of faith, but our faith is not only about belief; it is also about action. Right action was at the heart of the message of the prophets. It is difficult to find many references of the prophets prescribing belief, but there are many, many references to the prophets prescribing right action.

Follow along with me as I read from the 6th chapter of Micah.

Micah 6:1-8 –

1 Listen to what the Lord says: “Stand up, plead my case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say.

2 “Hear, you 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 plotted 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 olive oil? Shall I offer

my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 *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.*

It is very convenient that Micah provided a three-point outline for us to follow, and I will spend some moments on each of these three commands given by Micah – *act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God*

1. Act justly.

The prophets are perhaps most well known for their stern proclamations, often having to do with God's condemnation of the lack of justice in social systems and his anger at the unfair treatment of people, particularly people of little means, power, or influence. In the ancient world it was common for the wealthy and powerful to take advantage of the poor. Economic policies were often designed not only to drive people into poverty, but to keep them trapped in that poverty. The use of taxation policy, usury, and other economic practices made life very difficult for scores of people. It was, to use modern language, a rigged system (as is still the case today, so the words of the prophets remain very timely and applicable).

When discussing commands it is important to make a distinction between the types of commands that are offered in the Bible. The Bible's commands can generally be categorized under the heading of either *prohibition* or *prescription*. Commands of prohibition are the most well known and would be those such as found in the Ten Commandments, most of which start with the words thou shalt not. A prohibition, simply put, prohibits certain behaviors – thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not steal, and thou shalt not bear false witness. A prescription is the opposite, in that it does not prohibit certain behaviors as much as it commands that we engage in certain behaviors. A commandment of prohibition is aimed at preventing behavior that is destructive and harmful, such as theft and violence. The aim of prescriptive commands is to encourage behavior that is positive and helps to strengthen the fabric of society, such as laws that treat people equally and fairly and do not give unfair advantage to particular groups. An example of a prescriptive command is one related to what was called gleaning, which was the practice of leaving part of a field unharvested so that the poor could have a portion of the crop (Leviticus 23:22 – *when you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and the alien.* This practice of gleaning is central to the story of the book of Ruth). Law of prescription were not only limited to the prophets, but can be found throughout the Scriptures, such as this one in Romans 12:20-21 – *To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Justice is an incredibly important practice; it was in the ancient world and remains so in our modern world. We hear a great deal about *social justice* these days. *Social justice* is a term of which I am not a big fan, not because I don't believe in justice, but I don't think we often realize what we mean by a term such as *social justice*. For example, while attending the General Assembly last week I was interested, as always, in the resolutions that were presented to the Assembly. We are a group of autonomous congregations, so those resolutions have no binding power upon us, but they are important in that they speak for our denomination. One of the resolutions presented was to express support for Palestinian children. I am all for offering support to Palestinian children, but I couldn't help but wonder about other children in the world who need our expression of support. What about the children of Syria, who have suffered so much because of the warfare that has ripped apart that country? What about the children of the many people migrating into Europe, seeking a better life? What about the children of South and Central American who are making the perilous journey – sometimes without their parents – to the north to find a better life? Don't all the children of the world – especially those in such difficult conditions – deserve our expressions of support and desire for justice? The resolution was far too narrow in its

wording, in my opinion, and betrayed a rather narrow focus, as it was more about reacting to the political context of our own society. The prophets had a universal message, and any resolution that limits its scope to our political context rather than understanding the larger, more universally perspective, does not reflect the concern of the prophets, in my opinion. Imagine, for instance, if you have more than one child, someone praying for only one of your children. It wouldn't take long before you would object. I am one of five children; I have an older and younger brother and two younger sisters. Imagine if someone continually told my parents, *we are praying for Dave. We pray that God blesses him and looks over him.* After a while they might have said, *we have other children as well, you know.* If we only express a desire for justice and only express an interest in some people we are doing the same as a person who would only pray for one of a couple's children. God would say to us, I imagine, *I have more children, you know. My children aren't just in your congregation. They are not just in Shelbyville. They are not just in Kentucky. They are not just in the United States. My children are everywhere because every person is my child!* God's interest is broader than only our society, and that is what the prophets were trying to get people to understand.

2. Love mercy.

I don't know about you, but I have a love/hate relationship with social media. I am a regular user of social media because it is another tool that helps me to stay in touch with people, but I also believe that it brings out many of our worst elements and magnifies them. As a case in point, I read an article recently that absolutely astounded me. I had hoped that it was, perhaps, "fake news," so I did a little research to determine the authenticity of the story and found it was indeed true.

The story came out of the state of Florida and told of a disabled man entering into a lake. Not long after entering the lake he began having difficulty and called out for help. A group of people were near the edge of the lake but did nothing to help the man. In fact, not only did they not help the man, but they began to taunt him and even to video him as he struggled to keep his head above water and they continued to video as he eventually drowned. But the sadness of the story does not end there; after the man died at least one of the onlookers posted the video of the drowning on the internet.

Is this what we have come to? Have we lost all sense of mercy in this world? Thankfully, no we have not lost all mercy, although we have certainly lost some. Mercy was one of the traits of the prophets, even though we often associate them with judgment. But, as I said at the beginning of the message, the prophets knew the right word for the right moment, so they were just as at home being pastoral and merciful as they were judgmental (I can think of a number of passages, among them this one that is a particular favorite of mine – Isaiah 40: 29-31 – *He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might He increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted. But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.*)

I think it is also fair to ask, if there is a moral responsibility to be merciful to someone drowning within your field of vision, does that responsibility go away when distance increases? I believe those witnesses to the man's drowning had a moral obligation to help him, but tragically, they abdicated that responsibility. If we have an obligation to someone in our field of vision, what about those who are outside of our field of vision and, most often then, out of our thoughts as well. The prophets, once again, reminded us to always have a larger field of vision, extending our care and our work for justice to those outside of our own families, our own communities, and even our own nation.

3. Walk humbly with your God.

Humility, Paul reminds us, is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Galatians 5:23). The prophets also made the case for allowing humility to be a part of our lives.

Now, I am not a Hebrew scholar – or a scholar of any language. I have spoken before about my

struggles with Greek. While struggling through three years of Greek, I held on to the hope I heard expressed by many, and that was their assertion that Hebrew is a much easier language. Let me tell you this, just in case you are one of those who think it would be “great to read the Bible in its original languages” – Hebrew is a very difficult language! There are no vowels, it reads backwards from what we are accustomed to, and the letters do not correspond to anything that look like the letters in our alphabet. I say that to remind you that when I speak about the Hebrew language I am dependent upon others for their expertise. I have learned this fascinating bit of insight about the Hebrew word used for *humility* in this verse. The particular Hebrew word is used only in this one instance in the entire Old Testament. Although humility is a word used throughout the Old Testament, the Hebrew word used in this verse is used only in this one instance. Isn’t that fascinating? And here is what it implies – it speaks to us about the classic horizontal/vertical relationship between God and his followers. That is, if we consider ourselves to be a follower of God we must remember that the horizontal relationship – our relationship to our fellow man – is very important. In fact, the word used here implies that if we are not working for justice for others and if we are not demonstrating care then we cannot claim to be walking with God.

That’s quite a powerful truth, isn’t it? We cannot be right with God if we are not right with others. A right relationship with God requires a right relationship with others, and this is why the prophets so often railed against injustice and the ills of society, because they understood the importance of that connection.

The particular Hebrew word for *humbly* that is used here appears only this single time in all of the Old Testament. It carries the meaning of walking with, and what that means is that there is a union between one’s faith and one’s relationship to other people. It ties together our relationship with God and other people. This is the culmination – you can’t have this definition of humility unless things are right with God and humanity.

And so I will close with this thought – we are talking about *The Great Commands*, but does treating our fellow human beings justly, with mercy, and with humility need to be commanded? Shouldn’t that be obvious, and shouldn’t it also be something we would do without having to be commanded? It would be wonderful if that were the case, but obviously it is not. When we survey the course of human history, and when we survey current events, it becomes obvious why these kinds of behaviors are commanded by God – because otherwise they may not be put into practice. *Act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.* Not just great advice, but great commands as well.