

“Do Justice”

Micah 6:8

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How is Israel to come before the Lord, when they have wandered so far away? What can they do to restore the relationship that has been fractured by their own unfaithfulness? As Walter Brueggemann points out in his essay, verses 6-7 leading up to this well-known passage present a series of inappropriate answers to this question, escalating to the offer of the first-born child to pay for the “sin of my soul.” God rejects all of these and instead gives three requirements: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

The first command that the prophet delivers to the people of Israel seems simple: “do justice,” or in some versions, “act justly.” Do *mispat*. But what does this mean? How is this injunction to do *mispat* related to the rejection of sacrifice in verses 6-7? Does justice simply replace sacrifice, or is there something else going on?

God’s justice

Mispat in Hebrew scriptures describes both God’s activity and some human activity. Job’s friend Elihu presents the common view of justice as one of God’s attributes when he says, “The Almighty — we cannot find him: he is great in power and justice (*mispat*), and abundant righteousness he will not violate” (Job 37:23). Psalm 89 similarly affirms that “righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before you” (89:14). These are two examples of the way that justice (*mispat*) and righteousness (*tsedeqah*) are usually paired in the Hebrew, underscoring God’s character as just.

But what sort of justice is this? Psalm 82 gives a fuller picture. God speaks to the other gods in the divine council: “Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and destitute. . .” (82:3). *Mispat*, then, is connected with caring for those who are poor and unable to care for themselves. An even fuller picture of God’s justice emerges in Isaiah 58-59, a passage which is similar in tone to Micah 6. The prophet there is told to shout out to the people of Israel, to tell them of their sins in spite of their apparent piety. “Announce to the people their rebellion,” says the Lord (58:1). The people continue to seek God “as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance (*mispat*) of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments (*mispat*), they delight to draw near to God” (58:2). Yet their worship is misguided: “Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself? Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes” (58:5)?

In contrast to this kind of worship, the prophet paints the following picture of God’s justice: “Is this not the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin” (58:6-7)? God’s justice, God’s *mispat*, is manifested not in public displays of piety, but

in care for the neighbor, in simple acts of clothing and feeding and setting free those who are oppressed and poor.

It is in this context that we can better understand the condemnations that follow in the next chapter: “Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands at a distance” (59:14), and as a result “according to their deeds, so will he repay; wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies . . . so those in the west shall fear the name of the Lord, and those in the east, his glory; for he will come like a pent-up stream that the wind of the Lord drives on” (59:18-19). Isaiah’s condemnations resemble those that follow our Micah text in 6:9-16, which likewise describe God’s vengeance on those who have not followed the law. Such threats of deadly force in both passages must be held together with the reason for God’s fearsome judgment: the people have not followed the law, which clearly told them to care for the weak and powerless. Preaching about divine punishment always needs to be handled carefully, so as not to invoke the preacher’s own prejudices against imagined enemies of God. But prophetic texts like Isaiah and Micah show that failure to exercise God’s justice in providing for others brings the consequence of God’s wrath, even upon the chosen people.

Human justice

People in scripture, however, are not uniformly condemned for failure of justice. Abraham and Gad are both praised for showing *mispat*, as are David and Solomon (2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 10:9). In almost every case, the *mispat* shown by patriarch and king is explicitly *God’s mispat*. In speaking of Abraham, it is the Lord himself who says, “I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice . . .” (Gen. 18: 19). Moses praises Gad because “he executed the justice of the Lord” (Deut 33:21). The queen of Sheba praises Solomon by saying, “Because the Lord loved Israel forever, he has made you king to execute justice and righteousness” (1 Kings 10:9). In each of these examples, the justice which is praised in the person is an expression of God’s justice. In one notable exception, Absalom cries out, “If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me and I would give them justice” (2 Sam. 15:4). According to this text, there is no connection between the judgment Absalom wishes to render and the justice exercised by God. *Mispat*, throughout the Hebrew scriptures, belongs first of all to God and secondarily to humans who express God’s justice.

Justice against sacrifice

If we return to Micah with this fuller understanding of *mispat* and particularly with the words of Isaiah ringing in our ears, we hear very clearly the contrast that the prophet offers. God rejects the visible sacrifices that the people offer; and instead calls them back to justice, which means caring for the poor and needy, the widow, and orphan. This is nothing other than the second table of the law, which explicitly connects care of the neighbor with devotion to God. What does the Lord require? Provide for your neighbor, says the Lord through Micah. Stop offering sacrifices to me and start offering sustenance to those who need it most.

It is a sharp critique of the ways humans seek to encounter God and a particularly sharp critique of some human efforts at worship. Though we do not typically offer God burnt sacrifices anymore, or rivers of oil, we do pour ourselves into developing

worship that is lively, engaging, and relevant. We seek to bring God our best offerings of music, visual arts, and elegantly composed prayers and sermons. Preachers and other worship leaders invest great time and energy into public worship in efforts to attract worshipers and please God. Micah provides a critique of such efforts, reminding us that the point is loving our neighbor, not offering more and more impressive sacrifices.

What then are we to do? Is all liturgical action, all “coming before God” in worship rejected? Does Micah call us to abandon our efforts to worship and invest our energy instead in acts of justice?

Reconsidering the relationship of justice and sacrifice

Such outright rejection of worship in the name of justice, I think, is too simple. Micah does not condemn all worship of God, but he does condemn misguided sacrifices. The sacrifices listed in verses 6-7 draw attention to the one sacrificing, and one does not contribute to the care and well-being of the neighbor, but consumes vast resources rather than devoting those resources to those who need it most. This surely is a word we need to hear in a day when shrinking resources force us to make hard decisions about where to budget the church’s money: worship or justice? Micah would say unequivocally that justice holds the trump card here.

But there is more to Micah’s critique than this. Notice how the subject in these sentences changes from verses 6-7 to verse 8. In verses 6-7 the basic subject is “I”: “with what shall *I* come before the Lord? . . . shall *I* come before him with burnt offerings . . . ? Shall *I* give my firstborn . . . ?” The focus is on what we do, and the tone of desperation (or is it self-aggrandizement?) rises as the speaker goes on. “Look how remarkable I am!” the speaker seems to be saying. “I will do whatever it takes to show you how much I love you!” Yet verse 8 dramatically shifts the subject: “*He* has told you . . . what is good; and what does *the Lord* require of you . . .” Suddenly, “I” is no longer the subject; God is. Micah speaks in the voice of a patient parent here, calling the people to stop being so preoccupied with themselves and their overactive imaginations, and *listen*. This provides an important clue in reconsidering the relationship between justice and sacrifice, or justice and worship. Micah does not reject all worship, but the wrong kind of worship, that which begins with ourselves, with our gifts and our goodness, rather than with God.

Notice that this passage we have been considering comes after a summary of God’s saving acts to the people of Israel. God cries out, “O my people, what have I done to you? . . . I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam” (6:3, 4). So often in the Hebrew scriptures, this exodus event of deliverance reveals most clearly who God is: one who leads the beloved people from darkness to light, from oppression to freedom. In other words, God has shown justice in caring for a people who were nothing and making them into God’s own people. It is in light of this proclamation of God’s *mispat* that the people, too, are called to “do justice.”

In other words, it is only in light of verse 4 that we can rightly understand verses 6-8 and begin to make sense of the stark contrast between sacrifice and justice. The beginning point is God’s activity, God’s peculiar saving justice. The proclamation in verse 4, in fact, is liturgically cast, a ritual proclamation that is repeated many times throughout the Old Testament. What we see here is not a simple condemnation of

liturgical action, but a critique of liturgical action that begins in the wrong place. The good news of God's saving justice is at the center of our right worship *and* our justice-making endeavors. We are called to do justice out of knowledge of God's saving justice which has been shown to us.

This then provides an implicit critique not only of some liturgical practices, but of some justice-seeking. As in the case of Absalom, "justice" that emerges from our own desires alone is not truly justice. We do not motivate our own pursuit of justice; it comes from beyond ourselves, from God's justice which has first come to us.

In 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. gave a speech that points to this connection between human justice and divine justice. In "The Power of Nonviolence," he says,

I am quite aware of the fact that there are persons who believe firmly in nonviolence who do not believe in a personal God, but I think every person who believes in nonviolent resistance believes somehow that the universe in some form is on the side of justice. That there is something unfolding in the universe whether one speaks of it as a unconscious process, or whether one speaks of it as some unmoved mover, or whether someone speaks of it as a personal God. There is something in the universe that unfolds for justice and so in Montgomery we felt somehow that as we struggled we had cosmic companionship. And this was one of the things that kept the people together, the belief that the universe is on the side of justice.¹

"Something in the universe that unfolds for justice." Though King does not confine his remarks to a Christian audience, he is clearly speaking out of the long prophetic tradition of Isaiah and Micah which emphasizes this very point: that God, the power that created the universe, is on the side of justice. Human struggles for justice take their power from precisely this. God's *mispat* is the ground for our own.

But how do we know this justice, this divine *mispat*? This brings us back again to worship. At its heart, true worship of God proclaims to us this justice in vivid and life-changing ways. True worship emerges not from our own religious impulse, but from deep listening to God, to that power in the universe whose justice is deeper than our own, whose puzzling mercy pushes against the boundaries of our limited love. Worship need not fall into the traps that Micah describes in his indictment of sacrifice; instead, it can move us to "do justice" as called for in 6:8.

How might liturgical actions form us for justice?

In recent years, many books have been written on this very question.² In this brief essay, inspired by Micah's own discussion, I will suggest just four acts of worship that might shape people to "do *mispat*."

First, *proclamation*. Though proclamation in the narrow sense is not the first act of worship, proclamation broadly considered is the heart of what Christian worship means to be. That is to say, worship for Christians (as also for Jews) proclaims the good news of God's saving acts. Micah does this in 6:4: "I brought you up from the land of Egypt" Sometimes in our rush to enrich worship, we forget that this is the central point: to recount and make real the justice of God, which is different from our own. The Passover seder is a good example of such proclamation in a Jewish setting, retelling each year the story of God's deliverance of the slaves from captivity

into the freedom of the promised land. Christians, too, have a story of deliverance at the heart of our identity: the Good Friday-Easter narrative of Jesus Christ, who came to lead people from darkness into light, from captivity to sin into the freedom of God's reign. Micah's instinct is instructive here: proclamation of God's saving justice comes first. In song or reading, sermon or movement, compelling proclamation of God's astonishing *mispat* is the first way that we might shape worshipers to do *mispat* of their own.

Second, *confession*. In 6:5, Micah moves from proclamation of God's deliverance to a listing of Israel's unfaithful ways. So too in our worship, we need time to admit our failures to do justice, the ways in which we have worshiped false gods and neglected the needy all around us. The language of Micah 6:3 actually inspired an old Christian liturgy that, at its best, does precisely this. Since the medieval era, many Christian churches have included a litany on Good Friday called the "Solemn Reproaches of the Cross." In words patterned after this verse in Micah, God speaks to the people, declaring the ways in which God has been faithful, while the people have been unfaithful. One contemporary version of the Reproaches begins this way:

O my people, O my church,
What have I done to you,
or in what have I offended you?
Answer me.
I led you forth from the land of Egypt
And delivered you by the waters of baptism,
But you have prepared a cross for your Savior.³

The Solemn Reproaches do have a dark history linked to anti-semitism, which Christians today need to confess and which has led to revision of the older texts. But telling the truth about our shortcomings, whether in this or another form, is a practice we need to retain. Confessing our sin reminds us that the world is broken and still in need of God's deliverance. In this way, we may be ever reminded of the aching need for us to do justice.

Third, *forgiveness*. In the passage we are considering, forgiveness is not explicit, but it does come eventually in 7:18: "He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency." But even in 6:8, forgiveness is implicit, because God is still speaking to the people. In spite of their faithlessness, God has not abandoned them, but continues to call them into new life of justice, kindness, and humility. So too in our worship, confession of sin is always followed by declaration of God's forgiveness. This declaration sets us free from the bondage of guilt so that we may seek God's justice, not out of fear, but out of joyful gratitude.

Finally, and perhaps most strange to contemporary ears, *the law*. Few churches practice this today, but for centuries in some Reformed churches, the declaration of forgiveness was followed by a reading (or better, a singing) of the law. Including the law at this point in a worship service makes the clear point that those who have been forgiven and freed by God are now governed by the law of love. This is actually good news: by God's grace, we have moved into a realm in which love of God and neighbor is a new possibility. To invite a congregation to sing the law (whether Decalogue or Jesus' summary) is to follow Micah's own pattern: knowing God's justice, and having

confessed and been forgiven of our own injustice, we now hear what the Lord requires. Do justice. No longer a fearsome command to perform an impossible feat, the word comes now as grace.

In these ways, worship and justice need not be portrayed as enemies, but as two terms that require each other. God's justice is the originating point and the criterion of worship; worship proclaims this justice and forms us to go out and do justice in response.

Notes

1 Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Power of Nonviolence" (June 4, 1957), found at <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=1131>. I am grateful to Dr. Marcia Riggs for drawing this speech to my attention.

2 Examples include *Liturgy and Justice: To Worship God in Spirit and in Truth*, edited by Anne Y. Koester, Pastoral Liturgy Conference 2001 (Liturgical Press, 2002); *Let Justice Sing: Hymnody and Justice*, by Paul Westermeyer (Liturgical Press, 1998); and *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God*, edited by E. Byron Anderson and Bruce Morrill (Pueblo Books, 1998).

3 *Book of Common Worship*, Presbyterian Church (USA) (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 288.