

Micah 6:1-8. Context. Micah, who came from the small town of Moresheth outside Jerusalem, was active in the second half of the 8th century BC, probably a younger contemporary of Isaiah. Daniel J. Simundson writes of Micah in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (7.534) that "He felt compassion for the poor and dispossessed, and held the leaders responsible for their suffering. We can learn something about the people's social and economic situation from Micah's condemnation of their rulers, merchants, and prophets. Similar words from Micah's contemporary, Isaiah, add to our picture of a society where the rich and powerful used their influence to exploit the vulnerable and to create even greater inequalities of wealth and influence.... The economic situation of the poor was further aggravated by programs of armament and fortification in efforts to hold off the threat from foreign empires." Sound familiar? In this week's reading, the Lord calls Israel to account before the heavenly court (a frequent metaphor in the Hebrew Bible), with the hills and mountains bearing witness. The Lord is exasperated that Israel seems not to give a whit for all that the Lord has done for him. Israel asks what he must do to satisfy the Lord in terms of temple worship; but the prophet interjects with what is the essence of what has become known as "ethical monotheism." (Explanatory note to the text: Balak had enlisted the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites as they passed through his kingdom, but Balaam blessed them instead; as the Israelites crossed over the Jordan from their camp east of the river (Shittim) to the other side (Gilgal) God held back the waters for them so that they could safely pass into the Promised Land.)

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. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For 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. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Reflection. Nothing could be simpler than to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God, right? After all, God has already called us, loved us, been reconciled to us, saved us. What could be easier? But doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God is, unlike religious ceremony, a 24/7 vocation. Let's assume for the moment that we can handle walking humbly with God and loving kindness; but what justice have you been engaged in lately? And not just "obeying the law," but actively doing right by those who suffer injustice?

Psalm 15. Context. This psalm may have started out as an "entrance liturgy," a call-and-response as worshipers entered the Temple. But in its present form, it describes the character of those who dwell in God's presence. The attributes it lists are not prescriptive, that is, "this is what you must do if you want to earn God's protection." As J. Clinton McCann writes of this psalm in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (4.734), "The character and behavior of the righteous will inevitably mirror God's character and God's values." As Martin Luther might have said (and John Wesley would have agreed), these good works won't earn you God's favor, but when you discover for yourself how God has already graced you with divine love and favor, you respond with acts of grateful thanks, good works, the fruits of faith.

O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill? Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.

Reflection. The Psalmist gives concrete examples here of what it means to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God." Think of them as a "scorecard;" how well do you score? Where might there be areas for improvement? God will help you if you try!

1 Corinthians 1:18-31. Context. Confronted with prideful arrogance among some of the Christians in Corinth, Paul writes to them describing how the "wisdom of God," that is, God's plan to save humanity through the death of Jesus, is foolishness by worldly standards: "Christ crucified" is a "stumbling block" to Jews who couldn't imagine that God would let the Messiah (= "Christ") die, and "foolishness to Gentiles" ("Greeks" or non-Jews generally) who saw no virtue in the

humility and suffering that they saw in Jesus' life. For Paul, what God has done in Jesus turns the world's notions of wisdom and power on their head.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Reflection. When is being clever not wise, powerful not strong, and humble not weak?

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Matthew 5:1-12. Context. The evangelist Matthew gathered the sayings of Jesus into five principal collections, mirroring the five books of Moses. (Matthew portrays Jesus as the "new Moses" throughout his account.) The first and best known is the Sermon on the Mount, chapters 5-7, where Jesus sets out the principal rules for living for those who would follow him. The sermon opens with the Beatitudes which describe the fundamental characteristics of life in the Jesus community - living in the present, but with its "eyes on the prize." Each one of these pronouncements, not just the first, has God's coming kingdom in view: the kingdom belongs to the humble (poor in spirit); to those who weep over the fact that God's kingdom has not yet come in its fullness and that its reverse holds sway over the world; to those who yearn for God's justice (righteousness) for the poor and weak, not their own; to those who give comfort, physical and spiritual, to those who have none; to those who have a single-minded devotion to God (pure in spirit) who will be blessed with a vision of God when the kingdom finally does come; to those who actively seek God's peace and reconciliation in this world in the meantime; and to those who suffer for following Jesus here and now.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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."

Reflection. About this passage M. Eugene Boring writes in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (8.181) that "the life of the kingdom must wait for ultimate validation until God finishes the new creation. The future tense of the beatitudes resists all notions that Christianity is a 'philosophy of life' designed to make people successful and calm today, in the present moment. Christianity is not a scheme to reduce stress, lose weight, advance in one's career, or preserve one from illness. Christian faith, instead, is a way of living based on the firm and sure hope that meekness is the way of God, that righteousness and peace will finally prevail, and that God's future will be a time of mercy and not cruelty. So, blessed are those who live this life now, even when such a life seems foolish, for they will, in the end, be vindicated by God." Nothing sentimental, or particularly warm and fuzzy here!