

Micah 6:1-8 “What’s Good?”

What motivates you? “To do what? I eat because I’m hungry. I sleep when I’m tired. That’s kind of a loaded question preacher. Be more specific.” Okay, what motivates you to come to church? “Oh dear heavens, talk about loaded questions. Is it going to be one of *those* sermons today preacher?” Oh yes it is! Okay, so if that’s still a loaded question, let’s unload it. Let’s do one better and make it a yes or no question. When you attend worship at church, do you feel like you’re fulfilling a duty? “You are *not* making this any easier preacher. It’s still a loaded question.” Most yes or no questions are. Now generally speaking, when a preacher or a teacher hits you with a question about what you value or what motivates you, you want to have at least some idea what kind of answer the preacher is looking for, right? I mean, if you’re playing for Rice Krispy treats like I did when I was a kid, you want to increase the odds of getting one. Which means you better have a good answer ready to go. When I was a kid in Vacation Bible School, I discovered that the odds of getting a Rice Krispy Treat increased considerably if I answered, “Jesus.” And you know what? That seems to apply in our case this morning. At least until I made it a yes or no question. What motivates you to come to church? “Jesus!” Yay! Rice Krispy treats for everyone! But I asked, “When you attend church, do you feel like you’re fulfilling a duty?” “Jesus” doesn’t quite work in this situation. Makes it sound like you’re just fishing for Rice Krispy Treats. See, I want you to put some thought into this question.

“Yes or no! When you attend church, do you feel like you’re fulfilling a duty?” See, I’d want to qualify my answer. I’d want a chance to explain because this sounds too much like that, “Do you still kick your dog” question we talked about last year. If you say, “Yes, I do attend church to fulfill a duty,” you sound ... robotic. Insincere. Cold. It implies that you only go out of habit. Or worse, you do it out of fear. But if you say, “No, I *don’t* go to church to fulfill a duty,” it sounds like you don’t take church very seriously. For me, the answer is, “Yes, I feel that I have a duty to gather with God’s people to worship. God has done a *lot* for me,

24/7 every day every hour. More than I could ever list. I feel that the *least* I can do is give God some time, talent, and resources in return. So yes, I *do* feel that I have a duty to be in church, and yes, I *am* fulfilling a duty when I go. But I certainly don't want my answer to indicate that I don't get anything out of worship or that its obligation that keeps me coming.

The question about why we do what we do as Christians is a good one. We who lay claim to the label "Christian" or "Follower of Christ" probably have a good picture in our minds of how God wants us to live. These pictures probably vary from one person to the next and that's okay. One person might think, "My highest priority as a Christian is to conform to a particular moral code that sets me apart from all others, and in turn, I will do my best to persuade others to conform to the same code so we all feel good about our relationship to God." Another person might think, "My highest priority as a Christian is to just go out there and do Jesus work. You know, feed people, heal people and help folks in trouble." And there's merit to both of these priorities. But they aren't mutually exclusive. There's room for both. In fact, there *needs* to be a little of both or we become imbalanced. But let's not get into that now ... let's talk about another kind of reaction. Let's consider the person who just says, "Why bother?" And I understand that most of the time people won't say, "Why bother?" out loud. But it's there in deed if not word. Why ... bother. And maybe one of the reasons we surrender to "Why bother" is that we can't get our heads wrapped around the question, "How far do I have to go in order to conform my life to God's expectations?" Or to frame it another way, "What in the world do you *expect* out of me God? How far do I have to go? What do *you* require of *me*?"

The question becomes even more relevant when we ask it in light of the widespread Christian teaching that we are not saved by our works or by our ability to "do the right thing." Okay, so then if our efforts to "do the right thing" haven't got anything to do with how we're accepted by God, then *why ... bother?* Why bother, especially when trying to live by

God's standards makes us misfits in this world? And I say "misfits" because think about how many people who don't follow Jesus who think that we make life more difficult for ourselves than we have to? I'm thinking about a bumper sticker I saw once that said, "Those who turn their swords into plowshares will be ruled over by those who don't." The problem is, there's some truth in that. And that's the problem that we have with a lot of the classic moral teachings you see in the Bible. You might as well have a bumper sticker that says, "Those who turn the other cheek will have twice as many bruised cheeks as those who don't." Why put yourself through that? Why ... bother? Let's dig into our scripture here and see what Micah can teach us.

This is an interesting passage because most of the time we just look at verse 8. "He has shown you O Mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you? To do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God." "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God" is a great thing to put on a tee shirt or a coffee mug. In fact, I've seen tee shirts and coffee mugs with those words stamped on them. I've seen pretty awesome tattoos with those words! Might be one of those in my future. Who knows? But there's a *whole* lot more to this passage than this last verse.

A few weeks ago we were talking about how Matthew's version of John baptizing Jesus played out like a movie. So does this passage. Except this one is more like a courtroom drama. Think Perry Mason or Law and Order. A lot of scholars say that this section of Micah uses "courtroom language" of the day. What's going on is that God is expressing a grievance over the people's failure to live godly lives. God lays out the terms of the dispute before witnesses. In a nutshell, God's argument is, "After all I've done for you, you owe it to me to live the way I ask you to." God goes back over the history of Israel and highlights the points at which Israel has been in desperate trouble and God has stepped in and rescued them. In light of this retelling of the history of their salvation, the people then ask, "What then can we offer to please the Lord?" What would be a fitting gift in return for all God

has done for us? And the prophet answers by saying, “You already know what God requires of you because God has already told you: Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God.”

So Micah’s answer to the question about why we should bother trying to live by God’s values in an ungodly world is that we owe it to God because of all that God has done for us. Now that might not be a terribly inspiring answer, and earlier I said that it sounds too much like all I’m doing is fulfilling an obligation. So ... can the whole of the Christian life be reduced down to a matter of obligation? I don’t think so. Certainly the notion that we’re doing something for God because God has done so much for us *is* part of the equation, but it’s not *the whole*.

Why should we bother trying to live by God’s values in an ungodly world? I mean, honestly, God could do what many parents do when their kids ask, “Why should I do this?” What’s the stereotypical answer to that question? “Because I said so!” And God could quite reasonably say, “Do it because I say so and because you owe me,” but the *really* good news is that God is not like that. In an act of radically undeserved love, God goes way beyond that and promises to make it worth our while. Why should we do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God? This is something, I think, that we can discover by living it.

On my way home from Oregon the other day, I was listening to a podcast called “The Mental Illness Happy Hour.” The host, Paul Gilmartin, has a segment on his show where he reads surveys sent in by his listeners who struggle with mental illness. Paul Gilmartin is not a religious person by any means. In fact, he’s been on the receiving end of some pretty intense religious abuse in the past. Consequently he sometimes airs out his grievances about religion on his show. But over the past five years that I’ve listened to this podcast, I’ve seen him soften. And a lot of this has to do with his listeners who send him stories about how their faith has helped them through their mental health struggles. So the other day when he was reading his surveys, he shared this one from a young woman named Rowan. She wrote -

I was in church the other day with my parents silently seething at the system that has taken God and turned Him into a symbol of hate for so many groups. And I'm not going to lie, I was ready to give up on it all ... my faith ... everything. But then the communion hymn began, and I heard the young girl sitting behind me singing with all her heart, "Here I am Lord ... is it I, Lord. I have heard you calling in the night. I will go, Lord, where you lead me. I will hold your people in my heart." And suddenly I realized God isn't about the system that has corrupted His image. He is about this young girl unabashedly asking if she will be the one who will do great things in God's name. I sang with her for the remainder of the song and I believe that little girl just saved my faith.

To which Paul Gilmartin said, "Wow. That's beautiful. I love those moments when I feel like the Universe is talking to us and saying something to keep us going." *This* is the answer to the question, "Why bother?" *This* is why we do justice. *This* is why we love mercy. *This* is why we seek a humble walk with God. We do it because it makes a difference. We may not always *see* that difference, but it's great to hear from people whose lives have been transformed because we "bothered." It's great to hear from people whose hearts are softened and who have a renewed sense of purpose. These things don't happen just because we're fulfilling an obligation. These things happen because we live faithfully and abundantly. *This* is what is good. *This* is why we care about what God requires. *This* is why we live justly, love mercifully, and walk humbly. *This* is why we bother.