

E4A 2026 Micah 6:1-8

I was called into public ministry from teaching, and as rewarding as those years in the classroom were, one thing I knew I would *not* miss was grading students. I hated having to give a bad grade, even if that bad grade was well-deserved. I worked for a couple years in a Lutheran parochial high school, and I wrestled with how, in chapel, we could talk about being saved by grace and not by works...but in the classroom, the work was what saved your grade—and that was really difficult for some of my students who weren't academic achievers. I tried to make it, if not impossible, at least hard for students to fail. I didn't assign much homework, I gave them credit for any work they did do, and I allowed them to retake tests or rewrite papers if they got a bad grade. But a lot of times the students didn't pay much attention to their grades until the end of the term when they would all start to ask for...teachers say it with me...extra credit. Whether it was the high achievers who wanted an A+ and not an A, or the less academically inclined who just didn't want to fail, the plea was the same: *Isn't there anything I can do to bring up my grade?* This is pretty frustrating for teachers, because we understand that the grades aren't what really matter; learning necessary skills for life—the skills that the original assignments try to teach—that's what really matters. It makes you want to say, *Why didn't you do what I assigned in the first place...* Well, I'd argue that God asks us a similar question and is equally unimpressed by our offers to do extra credit.

I've honestly never been great at memorizing scripture, so I give credit mainly to the camp song, but Micah 6:8 is one verse I'll never lose: *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?* Like any other verse, it needs to be situated in context, which is within a larger prophetic dialogue. Prophecy in the Old Testament was not about predicting the future; it was God sending spokesmen to convict the people of how far they had strayed from God's vision for their community—overwhelmingly by their social and economic injustices—and to call them back to re-order their society according to the value system that God had established for them in the Law. To some extent it was about individuals and individual behavior, inasmuch as we all have personal responsibility, but the prophets always spoke to the whole nation about their collective ethics.

So this passage begins with the creation itself—the hills and mountains, as if they were a jury—hearing the case the Lord brings against the people. We might want to pause for a moment and ask ourselves whether we'd want the environment, in the condition that it's currently in, to judge how we have behaved as a human race...But then the Lord asks, *What did I ever do to you to make you act the way that you have been acting as a nation?* The earlier chapters of Micah

narrate the ways in which the people had not only abandoned the Lord to worship other gods but abandoned justice amongst themselves, cheating, exploiting, and oppressing each other—hating good and loving evil. *What did I do to make you act that way?* asks the Lord, with irony. *I rescued you from Egypt and paved your way into the Promised Land, that's what.* God gave the people every opportunity and every advantage to live righteously, but they failed miserably.

So then the question is *How can we make up for what we've done wrong?* And what follows is a ridiculously, impossibly exaggerated list of penalties: Burnt offerings of year old calves? Thousands of rams? Ten thousand rivers of oil? Child sacrifice of firstborn children? Setting aside that nobody actually had thousands of rams or ten thousand rivers of oil, none of these things are what God asked for. And none of these things, sacrificed to God, would heal the harm and correct the injustices that the people had inflicted on each other. God doesn't want the extra credit—not even these extreme amounts of extra credit. *God already told you what is good and what the Lord wants you to do: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.* This is especially important for us to remember as we look forward to Lent, when the church has traditionally encouraged the penitential practices of fasting, prayer, and almsgiving: nothing wrong with those—so long as we understand them as tools to help us live according to God's calling, and not ways to make up for our failure to answer that call.

We can't ignore God's instructions to be just and kind, to love our neighbors and even our enemies as ourselves, and then come before the Lord with all sorts of big, flashy acts of worship and repentance. God does not want our extraordinary acts of devotion on Sunday mornings: God calls us to the daily, consistent, persistent work of justice on behalf of the abused and loving kindness toward all people—just as God has been, is, and always will be steadfastly loving and kind to us. We cannot worship the God of love, justice, and mercy in here and then go out there and allow ourselves to be carried along in the stream of hate, corruption, and cruelty that is flooding the world around us.

God didn't give us commandments just for the heck of it. God outlined for us a way of living in community that would allow everyone to flourish together, because God, who created all of us, loves all of us together. When we ignore, neglect, or flat-out violate God's Law, the problem is not that we “lose points” with God; the problem is that we hurt other people. And that's why extra credit—even ten thousand rivers of extra credit—doesn't make up for it. The good news is that God is patient, merciful, and steadfastly charitable to us, even and especially when we fail. May we walk, humbled by that gift of grace, into the life of love and justice to which God call us.