

“Are You a List Maker?”

Micah 6:6-8

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

Smoke Rise Baptist Church

Stone Mountain, Georgia

August 19, 2007

There are only two. That's all. You are one or the other, but there is no middle ground. You are either a list maker or not. I am.

For years I carried a small notepad in my pocket on which I wrote everything I needed to do. I no longer carry a notepad like the one I am holding, but I still make lists and there is no better feeling than being able to mark something off my list. As a matter of fact, if I do something that I fail to write on my list, I pause, write it down and then mark through it. I see some of you grinning. I don't think I am alone.

I don't know if God has a notepad, but Micah implies He is a list maker. “What does the Lord require of you? To do justly, love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” Micah 6:8.

I like lists like this: clean, simple, easy to learn and remember. Before we examine this list, though, let's look at the prophet that gave it to us.

Micah was one of twelve Minor Prophets in the Old Testament, considered so not because his words were less important than others but because they fit on one scroll. He was a younger contemporary of Isaiah, which meant he lived and worked in Judah during the eighth century before Christ. This was a time of peace and prosperity for the Southern Kingdom of Israel, but the good times were about to come to an end. Danger lurked on the horizon.

Micah was not a timid soul. He was quite bold and courageous, as most prophets were. Even though he came from the common people in the village of Moresheth in the Judean foothills southwest of the capital city, he was not intimidated by the wealthy, powerful, influential leaders in Jerusalem. Even when his message to the movers and shakers was not well received, he did not hold back out of fear or rejection. He was faithful to God and shared the message on his heart.

What was that message? God was not pleased with the people that He brought out of Egypt and called to be a blessing to the world. The leaders, especially, had adopted the culture's values and had become greedy, power-hungry and complacent. They prided themselves on what they had achieved, acquired and accumulated and were obsessed with getting more. Their comfort was more important to them than compassion. Instead of championing the cause of the poor and powerless, they ignored or oppressed them. To make matters worse, they continued with their elaborate worship services, which was a farce. It was obvious that religion had become an outward show and they were merely playing church, pretending to honor and serve God.

God was not pleased with them was Micah's message. He was neither blind nor indifferent, but incensed over their behavior. At the same time, He was hopeful that the leaders would change if they were reminded of what God had always expected from His people.

What was the response of the religious leaders to Micah's charges? They were outraged. How dare Micah speak to them like this! Who did he think he was? What could

a country commoner teach them about God, life and religion? They retaliated with scoffing cynicism.

“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? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer the firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” Micah 6:6-7.

Their response to Micah’s accusations was to add more sacrifices to their ritual, which completely missed the point. God did not want more empty worship, but a change in their values, priorities and behavior. He wanted them to live up to what He expected of their ancestors and would expect of generations to follow: to do justly, love kindness and walk humbly with Him.

What does it mean to do justly? It means to be honest, trustworthy, reliable, dependable and fair in your dealings with all people. Jesus defined it by the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Take it a step further, though. There is more than a personal dimension to doing justly, as important as that is. There is also a corporate one.

To do justly means to work hard to bring about a just world for all people. God expects His people to expose injustice, whatever the source, and to be outraged on behalf of the poor and defenseless. Every person counts in the Kingdom of God and His people need to make sure that no one is left behind, mistreated, exploited, abused or ignored.

If you want to know what justice means, look at the words associated with it in the Bible: widow, fatherless, orphans, poor, hungry, stranger, needy, weak and oppressed. To do justly is to demand the same privileges and standards for the little and forgotten people of the world as the wealthy and influential. To do any less is an abomination in God’s sight, because every person counts.

Micah’s message hit hard because, for the most part, the prosperity and power of his audience had come at the expense of the poor and powerless. They had been trampled on and run over in the leaders’ pursuit of possessions, comfort and power. Instead of helping those who were struggling, they used them. This agenda was inconsistent with that of the One that brought them out of Egypt to the Promise Land. Evidently, they forgot their God championed the cause of the poor, weak and powerless and made sure no one was left behind. What did they do with that agenda? Whom were they serving now?

I believe I heard Micah’s voice at the United Nations a few weeks ago. I know I heard his message.

Gordon Brown, the new British Prime Minister addressed the UN soon after taking office. The heart of his speech focused upon global poverty and the challenge of meeting the Millennium Development Goals. In the text of his speech, Brown said, “It is already clear that our pace is too slow, our direction too uncertain and our vision is at risk. We cannot allow our promises that become pledges to descend into just aspirations and then wishful thinking and then only words that symbolize broken promises.”

He then challenged the delegates. “My argument is simple. The greatest of evils that touches the deepest places of conscience demands the greatest of endeavor. The greatest of challenges now demands the boldest of initiatives. To address the worst poverty we urgently need to summon up the best efforts of humanity.”

Continuing he said, “I want to summon into existence the greatest coalition of conscience in pursuit of the greatest causes. I firmly believe that if we can discover common purpose there is no failing in today’s world that cannot be addressed by mobilizing our strengths, no individual struggle that drags people down that cannot benefit from a renewed public purpose that can lift people up.”

To find that common purpose, he said, “Our objectives cannot be achieved by governments alone, however well-intentioned, or private sector alone, however generous, or faith groups alone, however well-meaning or determined. It can only be achieved in a genuine partnership together.”

He concluded by saying, “Let me say to faith groups and non-governmental organizations, your moral outrage at avoidable poverty has led you to work for the greatest causes, the highest ideals and become leaders of the campaign to make poverty history. Imagine what more you can accomplish if the energy to oppose and expose harnessed to the energy to propose and inspire is given more support by the rest of us, businesses, citizens and governments.”

Micah had to be smiling!

What does it mean to love kindness? Certainly it means to be compassionate and love people at their best or worst. However, it goes beyond this. To love kindness means to reject hostility, violence and bloodshed as a means of responding to differences. Revenge is not an option for God’s people.

Jesus reinforced this in the Sermon on the Mount. “You have heard it said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. If you love those that love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? If you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’” Matthew 5:43-48.

What does it mean to walk humbly with your God? I believe it means that we recognize that we cannot do justly and love kindness without His help. This challenge is too ambitious and intimidating. It is also too important to ignore. The world hangs in the balance. As a result, we invite God to join us along our journey of faith and rely upon Him for wisdom, guidance and courage.

Throughout the year we shall talk more about how we can meet God’s expectations and address several questions. What does it mean to be a person of faith in a secular world? How must Christians live to faithfully follow Jesus Christ, the risen Lord? What must the church teach to be the authentic community of disciples?

What can we do to promote justice in our world? How can we model unconditional love? What can we do to change the conversation from revenge to reconciliation? How do we become peacemakers? What steps do we need to take to walk humbly with our God?

Would you begin this journey with us today and help us answer these questions? Will you take Micah’s words seriously? More importantly, will you become Micah’s voice in our world?