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“Justice and Mercy”

Sermon Series: “Complements,” No. 3

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Micah 6:6-8

6 What can we bring to the Lord? Should we bring him burnt offerings? Should we bow before God Most High with offerings of yearling calves? 7 Should we offer him thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for our sins?

8 No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

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You're welcome to look with me at today's text...from the prophet Micah...chapter 6 of that book.

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For the last couple weeks, we've been talking about **complements**. Not the, “Wow, you look nice” kind, but the kind where two things...two concepts...two ideas come together and actually make each other better and more complete...complementing one another.

Like this: [ *Peanut Butter and Jelly on pulpit as a visual illustration* ]

Or even better, this...[ *Peanut Butter and Chocolate* ]

The Bible is full of complements...ideas that inform each other, but we're looking particularly at **some** that, on the **surface**, seem to **actually contradict** each other. Yet God brings them together such that they inform and define and strengthen each another.

**Faith** and **works** was our first example. Those seem like they're **opposites** to us...even in competition with each other, but the apostle James shows us they are, rather, **complementary** to one another...they work together in our redemption.

Last Sunday we talked about **shrewdness** and **innocence**...Jesus' comments about His followers being as wise, or, as shrewd as serpents and as innocent...as harmless as doves.

And wouldn't you know...that very day, we had an opportunity to practice that.

Some of you got an e-mail last Sunday, supposedly from me, asking you to buy \$1,000 worth of Target gift cards for me to give to church leaders. In that e-mail, I even, very kindly, suggested that you keep one of the gift cards for yourself for your trouble.

So here's where shrewdness comes in, OK? That's a scam...always a scam, so don't ever fall for that.

These scammers...they have not actually hacked into my e-mail or yours...or they'd be using my actual e-mail address, which they're not. But they get information online about us and they presume that church people are dupes and will do whatever their pastor says, which clearly shows that they don't know who they're dealing with here. [ *congregation laughs* ]

So...first of all, please know that none of the church staff would ever ask something like that of anyone.

Second, the church staff e-mails all end in @wfmc.net, so when a strange, out of character request shows up in your inbox, look carefully at the address...or the number from which it came. If you don't know it, don't reply to it. Don't even open it if you can avoid it, but do report it to your provider as a scam.

And even then, if you wonder about it, contact the person who supposedly sent it by a number or e-mail that you've used before...that you **know** belongs to them.

Or you could just go to their house and ask them.

That way, you can take the gift cards with you... [ *congregation laughs* ]

That is shrewdness in action. That is being wise as a serpent.

Although I'll admit that I struggle some with the harmless as a dove part of Jesus' command in situations like that, because people who try to take advantage of good people...I want to see them caught and punished.

In the end, I want to see them **redeemed more**, though...so that's good, but **man**...that sort of stuff makes me mad. God's Spirit's working on me with that.

Anyway, being as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove...those go together in Jesus' Kingdom.

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Today...we're looking at Micah's words about **justice** and **mercy**.

Justice and mercy.

When we think of those two concepts, we typically think, "mutually exclusive," right? You either experience justice or you experience mercy.

Think in terms of traffic tickets. Who all has been pulled over by the police?

Come on. Oh, I should have asked, "Who hasn't been pulled over. [*congregation laughs*]

When you get caught speeding, for example, the officer gives you **either** a **ticket** or a **warning**.

Or, I guess arrest is possible too, depending on "how much speeding you were doing."

But still, it's either **justice** or **mercy** that you get. One or the other. You can't really get both.

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You know, as I was thinking about that example, I realized...I always get justice from the police. Every time in my life that I've been pulled over...even though I'm respectful, I'm friendly, I'm cooperative, I've never done anything that's dangerous or just dumb...at least that I've been ***caught*** doing...but every time I've been pulled over, I've gotten a citation...a fine.

I don't know how some people do it, but I know people who've been pulled over but have ***never*** gotten a ***ticket***. Somehow they are able to ***talk*** or ***smile*** themselves out of justice and into mercy with the police.

Not me.

I'm tempted here to say, "It's just not fair that I always get justice," but of course that makes no sense. Actually, that's how people who ***presume*** upon ***mercy*** tend to think, which itself is unjust. Of course justice is fair, or it wouldn't be justice.

All that to say...they do seem incompatible, don't they? Justice and mercy? How on earth could they ever actually complement each other?

Well, they ***can*** and they ***do***, and it's important that we find out how, not just for the sake of ***theory*** either, but because Micah tells us that followers of God need ***to live out both justice and mercy***.

If you and I are going to get along with God, we have to ***actually live*** this ***very sort*** of ***complementarity***.

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It's appropriate to use the ticket illustration because the whole context of Micah's situation is presented here in a legal image.

In God's assessment, Israel has walked away from relationship with Him. They've gotten out of step with God.

So the question, then, becomes...how to get back in step with Him? What does the sinner need to do to restore relationship with God?

Some possible remedies are then floated, beginning in verse 6...possibilities that are all couched in corporate worship. The question is asked, "Can we get back in step with God by bringing him burnt offerings...a calf, maybe?"

And the suggestions as to how get progressively bigger and more elaborate. "What about if we offered Him ***thousands of rams***? Maybe 10,000 ***"barrels" of oil***"

So far, all these ideas had to do, in some way, with Israel's sacrificial system...***until we get to the last one***, which is the over-the-top wondering if ***offering our first born child*** to God would be the ***thing***...the thing that might put us back in His good graces, which tells you just how far they'd wandered from God.

They don't even know His character anymore.

"What will it take to fix this?"

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When you put it this way, it sounds like bribery, doesn't it? It sounds like asking the police officer who pulled you over, "Hey, ummm...what would it take to make this all just, you know...go away?"

In some nations, that's how it's done too.

When I was in Ecuador, an officer pulled us over. Let me say...I was **not** driving. But according to the missionary I was riding with, we were pulled over solely for being two white men, and the officer was hoping to get a bribe from us.

Bribery is part of the legal system in much of the world.

I'm so glad that's not how it works here.

And that's not how God works either.

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To all these suggestions, and especially to this repulsively over-the-top idea of giving God our first born child...God replies with the equally over-the-top response that all these ideas about how to restore relationship with Him are totally wrong.

None of the trappings of formal worship will do what's needed.

What **will?**

Verse 8 there tell us...and it's nothing new. It's been God's way for the ages.

What we're to give Him is **ourselves**.

But...we're to give Him a certain sort of self...a self of a certain character.

We're to give Him **ourselves...transformed into** and **living God's very own character...**and you see, the two specific parts of that character that Micah names...are **justice** and **mercy**.

Verse 8 there, **"The Lord has shown you what's good and what He requires: to do justly and to love mercy."**

Just as God does.

Now, that's not to say the offerings of worship are not meaningful. They are.

But they're **only** meaningful if they're offered by one who truly **lives** the justice and mercy of God.

Apart from that, all the offerings of worship...no matter what they are...they're just noise to Him.

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So, you see, not only are justice and mercy **complementary**, they are also **necessary** for relationship with God.

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But what does that mean? How do we do this?

Ah, this is where Jesus comes in!

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God's justice and mercy seem incompatible, since justice involves the dispensing of deserved punishment for wrongdoing, and mercy is about pardon and compassion for the wrongdoer.

But these two form a unity within God's character.

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Over 350 verses in the Bible...the vast majority of them in the Old Testament, by the way...contain direct statements of the mercy of God toward His people.

But both testaments also speak over and over and over again of God's justice and His wrath regarding sin.¹

God, uniquely, holds these in tension with one another, making Him both just and merciful.

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In every other religion in the world that holds to the idea of a supreme deity, that deity's mercy is granted only ***at the expense of justice.***

In Islam, Allah may grant mercy to an individual, but it's done by ***dismissing*** the ***penalties*** of whatever law has been broken. The offender's punishment...that was deserved and due...is brushed aside so that mercy can be extended.

Every deity of the non-Christian religions ***sets aside the requirements of moral law*** in order to be merciful. So in them all, mercy is at odds with justice.

Of course, if any ***human*** judge acted like ***that***, people would have a cow, since it is a judge's ***responsibility*** to see that the ***law*** is ***followed*** and that ***justice*** is ***provided***.

Any judge who ***ignores*** the ***law betrays*** their ***office***.

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But the Judeo-Christian God is unique in that His mercy is shown ***through*** His justice. Our God does not set justice aside to make room for mercy.

Instead, God chose to satisfy justice...the just penalty of sin...through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. That a perfect One paid the penalty that was justly due the imperfect...that means justice was done.

And even more, since it was in His own Son, God actually took the injustice upon Himself, which allows we who are undeserving to look to Him for salvation.

And you see, there is the mercy.

Writing to the believers at Rome, Paul put it this way:

“God, in his grace, freely makes us right in His sight through Jesus Christ, freeing us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life,

¹ Isaiah 45:21, Deuteronomy 32:4, Colossians 3:5-6

shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in Jesus. God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He himself is fair and just, and He makes sinners right in His sight when they believe in Jesus."²

In other words, all the sin from Adam to Jesus' day...God mercifully held...until Jesus, the savior, came and made the way of forgiveness possible. In Jesus' paying for all sin, you see, justice was met and satisfied.

And it all happened...it all came together at the cross.

Those seemingly irreconcilable things...justice and mercy...they came together. God's justice fell upon Jesus, so God's mercy could be offered to us...to all who follow Jesus in faith.

That's **how**...and that's **why**, in God the Father, justice and mercy complement each other. [*Peanut Butter and Jelly*]

You see, it's the police officer who does not ignore our speeding. He writes us the ticket. He does what is just.
But then...he goes to court in our place...and he pays our fine with his own money.
Or...he does the time in jail for our crime.
He takes our place, so we can be free.

That is justice and mercy.

And that's what puts us back into relationship with God.

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That's the **faith** of it.

But you know...that's also the **works** of it...because how **rotten** would we be...to **willingly...happily receive** that sort of mercy from God, but then **not show** that sort of mercy to others?

What sort of **ungrateful reprobates** would we be if we did not then **live** the mercy that we've **received**?

It's not enough just to receive it. To **really receive** it means to live it too...with the Spirit's help.

That's the whole meaning behind Jesus' parable of the unmerciful servant in Matthew 18.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus says, "This is what God's Kingdom is like," and he tells this story: there was a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who'd borrowed money from him. One of those servants owed the king millions of dollars, so the king ordered that he and his whole family and everything he owned be sold in order to pay the debt.

But that servant begged his king, "Please, be patient with me, and I will pay it all."

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:24-26

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 18:21-35

There was no way the guy could ever pay back the debt, but just the same, the king took pity on him and forgave his debt and set him free.

There's justice and mercy, you see? The king himself absorbed the debt that was owed him.

But then...what did that servant do? How did he respond to the mercy he was shown?

Ha – Jesus said he immediately went to another servant who owed *him* just a *little* money, and he grabbed him by the throat and demanded payment.

And that fellow then begged *him* to give him more time and he would pay it back. But the first fellow wouldn't wait and he had the man imprisoned.

Jesus said, ***“When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset, and they went to the king and told him everything that had happened.”***

And so the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, “You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt...and yet you refused to show someone else the mercy I showed you?”

And so that servant was punished for receiving, but then not offering, mercy...and Jesus concludes, ***“That’s what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters from your heart.”***

You see, the God of mercy and justice beautifully joined together...

the God who faithfully lives in mercy and justice toward us...

His full *intention*...His full *expectation*...is to build that very character...*His* character into us.

To be followers of Jesus...to live in relationship with God means *receiving* and also *living* God's character of justice and mercy...*together*.

And this happens...this comes together by the work of His Spirit in us.

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So...where is God working on that in your life?

The thing is, much like we are with faith and works and also with shrewdness and innocence, we all tend toward the one or the other. In our personalities, we all move more naturally toward **justice** or toward **mercy**.

But God wants to bring them together in us, and make that as natural in us as it is in Him.

So that's why I ask, on which is He working in you? And are you working *with Him* in that place?

Though we all would say, “Sure, God is merciful,” still, some struggle to believe that God will be merciful to them. Some carry guilt and shame that makes their lives feel heavy.

They truly do hate their sin, and God has helped them, but still, in times of weakness...when they find themselves asking forgiveness again for some familiar thing, they wonder, “Could God really forgive and love and change someone like me?”

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And then, there are others who struggle to believe that *justice* will ever really be done, because some days, they feel like their whole lives have been one long, tragedy. They watch godless people all around them in comfort and success and prosperity, while they suffer for their faithfulness. They cling to the promise that everything will eventually be made right, but they see no real evidence of that happening...and so at times they wonder...will God ever make anything good of all this pain and injustice?

Some struggle to embrace the *mercy* of God because we don't trust him to fully deal with sins done *by* us.

Others struggle to embrace the *justice* of God because we don't trust him to fully deal with sins done *against* us.

But you see...it's the cross...it's the cross of Jesus that declares, to both of those groups, that God *can*, God *has* and God *will* bring both mercy and justice to bear perfectly in every situation.

It's the cross that says:

We can know this.

We can rest in this.

We can celebrate this.

We can glory in this.

Because this is who God is.

God's nature is one of justice and mercy working together...and this is the nature God wants to create in every one of us. He wants our lives to be characterized by justice and mercy...complementing one another.

Will we invite Him...will we let Him create that in us?

I think that's what He wants to know today. I think that's the answer to Micah's statement, and that's what Jesus ultimately died to make possible in the life of His follower...somebody that works just as He does with regard to justice and mercy.

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### **Prayer:**

Lord, I don't pretend to know...I know for myself...but I don't pretend to know – none of us can know about other people – where we tend to fall. Some of us are very, very comfortable with mercy and do not like justice. And some of us are very, very comfortable with justice and sort of avoid mercy. Lord, You want to bring them together in us.

And I pray that wherever that point is in our lives, where You are at work, where You are trying to make a change, where You are trying to bring justice and mercy together Lord help us to embrace that work that You are trying to do. Holy Spirit, come and do a transforming in there so that we might reflect Your own character, so that we might be just people and we might be merciful people in our world...so we might represent You well and faithfully.

We open ourselves to You, Lord, however You want to work in us. Would You come and do that even this morning? In Your name we pray. Amen

**Closing Song:** “I Then Shall Live”

**Closing Word and Benediction:**

It really is what the world needs to see: justice and mercy together...combined. The mercy of our world often comes at the expense of justice; and justice is sometimes so very harsh. People don't understand how they could ever work together.

We are living examples of how mercy and justice are not at odds. God joined them together beautifully in Jesus...and He intends to join them together in beauty in all of us.

May the world see Jesus clearly in our justice and our mercy as we live that this week.

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Thanks for coming to worship. The Lord bless and keep you. Amen

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