

Just mercy

JOEL EDWARDS

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CWR *Micah Challenge* →

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Introduction

Very few Christians will ask you to leave the room if you talk about ministry to the poor. Even parts of the Christian Church that are nervous about social action have come to realise that you simply cannot separate love from action. So now, more than ever, thousands of churches are involved in acts of kindness.

There is another level of prophetic engagement, however, that is urgently needed. It is to be involved in biblical advocacy. In the words of Proverbs, it is to 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves' (Prov. 31:8). More often than not, though, it is to speak up *with* the poor who cannot speak up alone.

At the dawn of this millennium the world woke up to the notion that we have a moral responsibility to do something about extreme poverty – about the more than one billion people who live on less than a dollar each day. In response 189 nations made eight promises to the poor which were described as the Millennium Development Goals. These goals aim to halve extreme poverty by the year 2015.

Our study provides not a political but a biblical response to our promises to the poor. The work of Micah Challenge is a global Christian response to these promises, motivating Christians to bring Jesus into the equation. And in 2010 – when we are two-thirds of the way into making good our promises – we have an opportunity to do just that.

This study aims to open our eyes to our mission to the poor, and to motivate us to become involved in a global mission to the poor. This unique partnership between CWR, Micah Challenge and CompassionArt is all about remembering and responding to the poor. We are all grateful to Kingsway who have made available a selection of four songs from the *You Have Shown Us* CD as free downloads to help you reflect on the topic for each week.

Joel Edwards



WEEK ONE:

Walking with God

Micah now and then

I know it was a long time ago, but in the UK during the 1960s *Catweazle* was a favourite TV programme. It followed the adventures of a medieval wizard who cast a spell and found himself in the twentieth century as a result. Every day for him was a culture shock, and his entire ability to survive was dependent on a young boy who protected, fed and helped him to find his way back to the past. Nothing *Catweazle* had to say seemed suited to the twentieth century.

I'm pretty sure Micah, too, would struggle today. But his message would be like a song in season. Fat-cat financiers made rich on the poor, sweat-shop owners and people pumped up with pride would all understand him clearly enough. And so would religious leaders!

We know relatively little about Micah apart from the fact that he came from a small town in the lowlands about twenty-two miles southwest of Jerusalem called Moresheh-gath and had a very clear sense of his own calling (Micah 3:8; 7:7). He was what scholars refer to as a 'minor prophet', whose main work took place between 742 and 687 years before Jesus was born. Micah, and other eighth-century prophets such as Amos and Hosea, lived at a time when the Jewish people were divided into two. The southern kingdom of Judah, which remained the religious centre as it housed the Temple

in Jerusalem, was often at odds with Israel, which comprised the ten northern tribes, and is often referred to in the Bible as Samaria – the name of its capital city. But the prophets would frequently cross the political boundaries in order to take God’s message to the divided people.

Micah’s prophecies were aimed mainly at Jerusalem, where the religious observances associated with the Temple took place. This was a period of political alliances between neighbouring nations, and in this period Israel and Judah were very conscious of the neighbouring superpowers of Assyria and Egypt. The alliances made were usually aimed at securing financial and trading benefits.



Just a thought

Micah is not giving a new answer, he is simply reminding them of the covenant law.

Mary Evans,
Bible teacher

When Micah appeared in Jerusalem, the people were enjoying a time of prosperity. But it was not prosperity with equality. The fat-cat landowners were getting rich at the expense of the poor and were straying from the commitment the people of Israel had made with God when they were founded as a covenant nation. Even more disturbing was that despite all the extortion and greed, the people thought that they could continue business as usual. Worship, in their minds, had nothing to do with their lifestyle outside the Temple. As far as they were concerned a lavish offering would make up for the more basic requirements of justice, mercy and kindness.

Micah would have been an uncomfortable presence for the people – not so much because his words were penetrating but because he was calling them back to what they already knew: that God wanted far more than religion. God wanted them to keep the promises which had shaped them as a nation (Exod. 20:1–17; Deut. 10:12).

Do have a look through Micah’s entire prophecy. He begins with a warning of God’s judgment to come (1:2–2:11), denounces the present leaders

for being corrupt (3:1–12), presents a sense of the salvation which will follow despair (2:12–13; 4:1–5:15), and moves on to a powerful account of God's case against the nation (6:1–16), which includes the passage we will explore (6:6–8). What is also uplifting about this man is that in all of this he is also completely aware of God's hope. After judgment and challenge there is hope and redemption (7:8–20). And this is the spirit of the Scriptures. The message of the Bible is ultimately one of hope. God challenges us not just to make us feel bad about what we haven't done but to get us to change our ways and to make sure we don't miss out on hope.

Micah would have been at home at an Africa Aid concert like Jubilee 2000, or wearing his white armband in Make Poverty History. As far as he was concerned everything connected with worship involved doing justice and loving mercy. And this was made possible by a lifestyle of humility.

Watch your walk

I left Kingston, Jamaica for the UK aged eight. I returned for the first time when I was twenty-seven, and was very glad to be 'back home'. One day, though, as my wife and I were out for a walk someone shouted, 'Foreigner!' We had no idea who they meant. But they were addressing us. We thought we dressed and looked like Jamaicans. One simple difference, however, told everyone we were only visiting: it was the way we walked!

The Bible has quite a lot to say about 'walking'. In Genesis, for instance, Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Isaac are all described as men who walked with God (Gen. 5:22,24; 6:9; 17:1; 24:40; 48:15). It is one of the most natural things able-bodied people do. And, as far as Micah is concerned, in our walk with God three things should always mark us out from everyone else: we act justly, we love mercy, we flow with humility (Micah 6:8).

Working it out

What makes your 'walk' distinctive today, and how could you make it more so?

Just doing justly

Justice and the Disneyworld syndrome

Everyone should go to Disneyworld! Twenty years after my visit it still rates as one of my best experiences of all time – and I still have the Goofy photos to prove it! One of my many Disney memories is of standing in line for forty minutes waiting for a four-minute ride and hearing the same mechanical voice repeating, 'Please exit on the left-hand side. Please exit on the left-hand side ...' Why do I remember this? Because of the number of people who were coming off the ride on the *right-hand* side! Just four minutes of fun was enough to make them forget the words they knew by heart.

When it comes to justice most of us are in Disneyworld. After idolatry, God says more in the Bible about injustice than any other subject. But, even so, many of us who have attended church for decades can still count on our fingers and toes the number of Sunday sermons we have heard on justice. And this really does matter because what we preach and talk about affects what we do.

Is justice out of the question?

So what has made something which is so mainstream become so marginalised? It's probably because we have lots of questions about it.

Too political?

Well, for a start, justice is likely to end up being far too political for most of us. And there is no point denying it. No great movement for emancipation – from that of the Israelites in Egypt and the Jews in Babylon to the movements led by Wilberforce, Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jnr – is likely to avoid some degree of political involvement.

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Working it out

How do you react to this quote from Archbishop Tutu?



Just a thought

In our time God's yes to the world reveals itself, to a large extent, in the church's missionary engagement in respect of the realities of injustice, oppression, poverty, discrimination and violence.

David Bosch,
Transforming Mission

Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos 5:24, ESV

Is justice the gospel?

This is an odd question because the Bible makes no distinction between God's justice, which redeems us at the cross, His holiness, which we share, or His righteousness, which we display.

Justice is the river that flows from the heart of God, responding to our sin and sinfulness in all its private and public manifestations. A theology that puts a wedge between personal holiness and prophetic advocacy uses the Bible to build a dam in that river.

Don't you have to be a specialist?

Simply put, justice isn't politics. It's far more than that. Justice is righteousness responding to wrong.

And this means that doing justice is central to the Christian faith. God's justice marks us out by the way we walk at work and play. Everyone can act justly.

People who act justly are known in the workplace to be the kind of people who deal fairly with friends and foe alike. Acting justly means that we do everything in our power to ensure that we all belong to a society in which righteousness exists in our social systems and businesses as much as in our public and private worlds.

God's justice is more than a message. It's God's mission to a broken world.

Working it out

Compare the two sections of Scripture below. What lessons can we draw from the relationship between justice and righteousness?

Psalm 72:1–4

- ¹ Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.
- ² He will judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.
- ³ The mountains will bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.
- ⁴ He will defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
he will crush the oppressor.

Romans 3:21–26

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to

all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – ²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Loving mercy

Is it possible that those who experience our ministry will have the slightest suspicion that God really cares for them?

Moss Nthla, General Secretary, South African Evangelical Alliance

It's really hard to teach someone about mercy. Mercy is innate to our humanity, and when it goes the very meaning of being human is undermined.

Thank you, Mr Policeman!

I was the middle driver in a convoy of three cars driving in a great hurry at 2 am. Suddenly the bright light behind me, which I thought was coming from the third car in our convoy, went blue and started flashing. Before long an exasperated policeman drew up alongside me and indicated that I should pull over. When I did he told me to wind down my window and addressed me by name! He asked if I knew what speed I was driving at. I had spasmodic amnesia. Then he told me to drive home safely and not to be stupid. To my amazement he added, 'And you can tell your friend Mr Francis in the TR7 in front of you to watch himself.' Finally he waved me on.

Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

Matt. 5:7, AV

I couldn't believe it. He had me cold and yet there was no caution, no booking or even a command to report to my nearest police station. Just a tired policeman showing mercy. And for months to follow I loved all policemen!

Our biblical understanding of mercy begins at the mercy seat between the wings of the angels over the ark of the covenant (Exod. 25:17–22, AV), and is ultimately best demonstrated at the cross of Christ. No deed done on earth has ever demonstrated mercy so fully and unconditionally. But for us God's mercy is delivered in fresh supplies each day.

Pass it on

And the people who should best show mercy are those who have received it. The Christian walk should therefore be typified by delight in showing mercy. Those who do so are the first to restore rather than condemn. The first to forgive rather than keep scores. The first to befriend the workmate or immigrant.

People will know God is mercy only when they see mercy in us.

Working it out

Take some time to discuss two questions:

- When did someone last show you an act of mercy?
- What was your response to this?

Is it weak to be meek?

Most of us have a problem with humility. It smacks of weakness and subordination. Humility struggles in our culture of self-esteem and does little for our career development. In a celebrity culture it has been denounced as outdated.

What Churchill said about Attlee: 'He is a very humble man with a great deal to be humble about!'

What Attlee said about Churchill: 'There but for the grace of God goes God.'

Winston Churchill was Britain's war hero prime minister who was famous for his great speeches demonstrating his spirit of adventure. Clement Attlee was a less prominent political figure, and the two could be very critical of each other. They seemed to exemplify different approaches to humility.

Christians need to strike a balance between looking like weaklings and parading false modesty in an effort to look humble. But the fact is that you can't be meek if you're weak. Humility presupposes an element of influence or even power over other people. And it doesn't help to have a false sense of modesty either. That is only a façade that fades under pressure. The walk of humility is what makes justice and mercy flow naturally from us to others – even to people in faraway places we are never likely to meet.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Matt. 5:5

As we will see later in our studies, humility shouldn't be confused with self-deprecation. Rather, it's the ability and the willingness to put myself and my influence at someone else's disposal. And what makes this kind of humility so transformational is that it is humility exercised in God's presence for the benefit of others.

In the next three studies we will continue to explore these lifestyle themes. Our studies will weave together biblical reflections, worship, prayer, and insights on justice from a range of contributors. But we will also have an opportunity to explore what these themes mean for us through small group or church activities.

Our time together will explore, too, how you might be involved in and add your voice to Micah 2010 – our poverty reduction campaign. You will discover how you can get plugged in to the campaign – not just as a one-off event but as a future lifestyle. Let the Spirit lead you to make a difference.

A prayer for humility

*May the mind of Christ my Saviour
Live in me from day to day,
By His love and power controlling
All I do and say.*

*May the peace of God my Father
Rule my life in everything,
That I may be calm to comfort
Sick and sorrowing.*

*May the love of Jesus fill me,
As the waters fill the sea;
Him exalting, self abasing,
This is victory.*

*May His beauty rest upon me
As I seek the lost to win,
And may they forget the channel,
Seeing only Him.*

Kate Barclay Wilkinson



FREE SONG DOWNLOAD

Visit www.micah2010.org to download Andy Bromley's song 'Love Mercy'.