



From Great to Good

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**Micah 6:1-8
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Before I came to Valley, I had my own little church in New Jersey. Every year, I attended a conference for small churches. They called it the Wee Kirk conference.

At one of the conferences, I took a workshop led by a pastor of a large church. I don't remember the title of the workshop, but I remember his talk. The pastor told us about a secular book called "Good to Great" by Jim Collins written in 2001. It became a #1 bestseller.

The author conducted research on companies that had become great companies. He highlighted 11 of them in his book. He saw a pattern in these companies and gave 5 reasons why they became great companies. (Greatness here is defined as great stock returns in the market.)

Here are two of the reasons why these companies became great:

Great companies put the right people in the right positions. The author put it this way: Great companies "first got the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats."

Another thing great companies did: instead of doing lots of things good, they choose one or two things that they can become the very best at, and concentrated on that.

Not only did business leaders gobble up this book, so did church leaders, including the pastor of the workshop I was attending. Church leaders wanted their churches to be successful. Of course, success includes growing your church

in members and money. I remember going back to my little church, buying the book, and trying to implement some of the strategies of these great companies.

But here is the problem: greatness is hard to sustain. Of the 11 "great" companies that Collins profiled in his popular book, most are not so great 15 years later:

- One no longer exists.
- One needed to be bailed out by the government
- One is half its value; 5 others have made hardly any market gains.
- One of the companies was sold
- Only two have remained "great"

Here is the question: *Is greatness really the best goal for an organization, a nation, a business or a church?* It was the goal of Trump to make America great again, and Americans ate it up. We love greatness.

However, when you turn to the Scriptures, one of the things we realize is that greatness is vastly overrated. We are going to see it in our scripture passage today. So turn with me to Micah 6.

Prayer: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

A little background: much has happened between God and God's people, the Israelites. In our passage is an imaginary trial. In this trial, God is the injured party. The Israelites are the defendants. They have not paid much attention to the things of God. The witnesses for God is all of creation. Watch for all of these parts as we read the scripture passage.

Read Micah 6:1-8

Micah is a prophet of God. Prophets in the OT spoke God's words. Micah is writing in a time when the nation of God's people is no longer great. They were once. They were to be a light to other nations for God. But they kept walking

away from God. The once great nation split into 2, a northern kingdom and a southern one. The northern one eventually was swallowed up by its enemies.

What happened? In this passage, Israel is just a shadow of its former glory. Just like those companies I told you about, they could not sustain greatness. Why? The reason is they rejected God's commandments: to love God and love their neighbor. They forgot the things of God – the main purpose for their existence.

God, the injured party, says look at all I have done for you. I delivered you from bondage; I rescued you over and over again; I have loved you and stuck with you for centuries. Yet, you still forgot me.

And as a result, they were no longer great.

The people feel terrible. How do we become great again? Shall we bring more burnt offerings? Shall we up the amount of rams and olive oil? How about my firstborn (totally ignoring God's law where God says he doesn't take human sacrifice)?

Apply this to the church today and we might ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord? Shall we show God our great buildings, our filled seats, our million-dollar budgets? Will God be pleased if we show God that we're successful? Isn't greatness what God is after?"

Micah says no. Notice what he says (v. 8): "He has told you, O mortal, what is *good*." [emphasis added] What does the Lord require? Goodness, not greatness. But it sure is tempting to go after greatness. Greatness gets your name on the lips of everyone in Green Valley. Greatness brings in more people and money. But God doesn't require greatness -- only goodness.

Take a look at the early church. The early church grew rapidly even though they were underground and persecuted. So you would expect grand evangelism strategies, great preaching, attractive worship, superior leadership, better

methods -- all things that we measure and value.

But the truth is that, as scholars have examined the documents of early churches, they discovered that the real virtue that caused the early church to grow was *patient faithfulness*. They spent up to three years examining people before admitting them to membership, during which they trained them in faithfulness and to represent the character of Christ. They didn't have much of a focus on evangelism or on preaching. Instead, it was about cultivating faithfulness and building up people who looked like Jesus.

They attracted others not because of their success but because of their character. In Acts chapter 2, in the famous description of the early church, it said they "enjoyed the favor of all the people."

They focused on goodness, not greatness. They didn't focus on having the best choir, the best preacher, the best worship service. *They measured success by growing good people rather than by growing a great church.*

Micah gives us the answer on how to do that. Let us read it again. "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Will you repeat that sentence with me?

To act justly.

The prophet says that goodness begins with doing acts of justice. The word used here (*mispat*) isn't rewarding good and punishing evil. This isn't about enforced justice. We have law enforcement to do that. Think about the 10 Commandments. Jesus said the 10 commandments can be summed up this way: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

A good church acts justly by loving God and their neighbor. It is insuring everyone has what they need. It means treating others with fairness and showing concern for people who are weak, powerless and exploited.

"Do justice," says Micah.

One of our members told me the other day about one of the items on her bucket list – to be arrested for a good cause. I never heard that one on a bucket list before! She is heading to Washington DC for the “Women’s March on Washington” on January 21. Maybe I will get arrested, she said.

I see justice acts here at Valley all the time: the Mission committee, the Patio sale to support the Mission committee in its work; the quilters sewing quilts for the needy; the sewers sewing bags for walkers; the food and money you bring on the first Sunday of the month for the food bank (by the way, the annual meeting is coming up on Feb 3. Your ticket to the meal is a can of food, which will be donated to the food bank). Many of you volunteer at the Food Bank.

Our acts of justice continue: the people who make meals at Crossroads in Nogales to feed the people who come over the border; our people who volunteer at St Andrews mission, a place that offers medical opportunities for people who can’t afford medical care. Every week, I hear about our people doing acts of justice behind the scenes. Every week I am amazed at the new things I discover.

We do acts of justice, my friends. This makes us a good church.

To love mercy, Micah says.

The word used here (*hesed*) means more than mercy or as other translations use, kindness. It includes love, loyalty and faithfulness To "love kindness" is to keep this loyalty and faithfulness at the heart of all your relationships with God and with others.

"Love kindness," demands Micah. Keep love and faithfulness at the center of your relationships...with family, friends, work associates, neighbors, and strangers in the hallway.

I see this kindness when you greet families during memorials and serve them at a reception. I see kindness when you walk alongside a spouse with dementia and continue to be with that person day after day. I see kindness when you visit the homebound, those in the hospital. I saw kindness this week when one of our members organized meals for a family sitting by the bedside of a dying family member.

We do kindness, my friends. This makes us a good church.

And finally, Micah says, “walk humbly with your God.”

As you can guess, the Hebrew word used here (*hasenea*) means more than simple modesty and humility. It implies attentiveness, or paying attention to God. The people are to watch God for what is good, and not do their own thing and call it good.

When Jesus first called his disciples, he didn't say, "Do your own thing to make yourself great." Instead, he said, "Follow me" (Matthew 4:19). When Jesus said good-bye to his disciples for the last time, he didn't say, "Go and build the best worship service ever" or "grow your churches as big as you can." He said, "Go and make disciples."

Humility is the art of paying attention to the things of God, whereby we forget the busyness of our church for a moment. Humility is not boasting of all the great things we are doing, but instead listening to what God is saying and follow.

"Walk humbly with your God," says Micah. This one is probably the hardest of all. Walking humbly with God is learned over time, and we need reminders of it when we begin to boast of our greatness.

So as we put all these three together, it is not so much on what we accomplish as

a church and how great we are, but on how much we love. Have we simply loved people enough to act justly, to be kind, and to give ourselves over to walking humbly with God and following God's lead in our lives?

What does the Lord require? Not greatness, but goodness. So repeat after me:

Act justly.

Love mercy.

Walk humbly with God.

Take those words home. Stuff them in your pant pockets with your keys, or in your purse. Put those words into your billfold along with the other credit cards and have them available any time. Put those words into your heart and mind and easily carry them within.

So we can be a Micah 6 congregation. That is my prayer. May it be so.