

# Finding the Good Life

Micah 6:6-8

Farmville Baptist Church

June 12, 2022

What constitutes a good life? What are the pieces that make a life something truly worthwhile from an eternal perspective? I don't know about you, but I've wondered that a lot in the past few years. Maybe it's getting older, having a family, changing jobs, maybe it's just the chaos in our world and the <sup>ongoing</sup> uncertainty of COVID-19, but I've had this matter weighing on my mind. Maybe you have, too.

I think <sup>the arrival of</sup> COVID was the kicker for me that sent me into deep reflection. I would go for hikes with my son or drive my daughter around to get a quiet nap, and I would ponder. On the other side of COVID, should it ever get here, what would life be like? Would my children live in a world where they

could be safe and learn and grow and thrive? Would our family's future be as bright as it had been? And would our goals in life as a family stay the same, or would we, like so many others, reevaluate what is important and what isn't? Ultimately, what would it look like to live the good life now?

~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ <sup>This</sup>, is not a new question. For centuries, millennia even, folks have wondered what living the best possible life looks like. For some, it has revolved around wealth, status, or power. For others, it has been tied up with family, with descendants, with leaving someone behind that remembers you. Some folks want to build something or contribute to something or start something that make a difference in the world. And others simply want to be consistently honorable and self-sufficient in life.

Yet the question still remains, because the days of our lives are the most precious, and most fleeting, resources we

have – and we want to spend them well. So the conversation continues. The philosophers and preachers wrestle. The poets and songwriters lend lyrical thought to the debate. One of these, the poet Mary Oliver, captured the core of this most human of contemplations in her poignant poem, “The Summer Day.” It begins,

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper.

This grasshopper, I mean –

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand...

Observing the intricacies of the insect on her hand, reveling in the rhythms of nature, Oliver says,

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the

fields,  
which is what I've been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?<sup>1</sup>

That poem, and especially those last two lines, stuck with me in the early days of COVID. “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” And it continues to stick with me now. After all, each of us only gets one chance at this earthly life. We may have eternity before us in the new heaven and the new earth, but life as it is now – we don't get any do-overs. So we have to get this right.

Fortunately, we are not the first ones to try to figure this out.

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<sup>1</sup> The Summer Day, by Mary Oliver

In fact, we could say that a good portion of the Bible is about trying to figure out the answer to this question: what do we do with our one wild and precious life? What is the good life, and how do we find it? Indeed, much of the Old Testament is a record of how people, and especially the covenant people of God, attempted to find the good life, as individuals, as a community, and eventually as a nation. And sometimes they found it – freedom from slavery, possession of a land described as flowing with milk and honey, long and stable kingships under David and Solomon. Yet consistently, over and over again, the people of God found the good life getting away from them, lost to war and famine and exile. What happened to the good life they had – and how could they get it back?

This is, fundamentally, the pair of questions the Jewish writers known as the prophets wrestled with and tried to

answer. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, all of these biblical voices looked at a community of faith and culture in decline, or already defeated and exiled, and assessed what had happened, where things went wrong. And then all of them gave insight, guidance, and prescriptions for regaining the good life God intended for his people and, indeed, the world. But perhaps none of them were as succinct as our biblical prophet today, Micah.

As I prepared for today's message, I went back and read the entirety of Micah. That's not all that hard to do – it's only 7 chapters – but those 7 chapters pack a punch. Micah was so focused! He clearly lays out what the problem is in the first 3 chapters, pointing out the faithlessness of the people of Israel and Judah, the corruption of their leaders, the injustice in the streets, the exploitation of the powerless by the powerful, the selfishness and self-centeredness that

had become endemic to the society. And because of all of that, Micah said, bad things were happening. The good life was slipping away.

But it could be regained. Chapters 4 and 5 of Micah paint a picture of God's hopes for his people, a faithful future where the nations will be drawn together in peace, where swords will be beaten into plowshares and everyone will sit under their own vine and their own fig tree and no one will make them afraid. It's a beautiful image, one that will be brought about, Micah says in chapter 5, because of a ruler that would come from Bethlehem, one who "will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God," for "his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth and he will be our peace."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Micah 5:4, 5a

There is hope for the future, hope to find the good life of God's plan again.

All of this is in the background of our passage this morning, because given all that has gone before – his God-inspired diagnosis of Israel's and Judah's sin and corruption, and his God-given glimpse of a more hopeful future – given all of this, Micah tries to figure out how God's people can return to that good life. In Micah 6:6-7, the prophet wonders what he and his people could do. What should they offer in worship and sacrifice? Burnt offerings? Yearling calves would be a significant economic gift – could a large donation to the Temple's sacrificial system bring back God's favor and a return to the good life? If not, what about an absurdly large gift to God – a thousand rams or ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Could a person, a community of faith, a nation, even, buy itself into God's good graces? What about the

ultimate gift – the sacrifice of their children? Now, to be honest, I think Micah is engaging in a bit of hyperbole here – the Bible is very clear that sacrificing one’s child or a nation’s children is the mark of idolatry, and has nothing to do with the true worship of God – but it’s part of this wider exploration Micah is doing. In short, is there anything the people of God could offer to make up for their faithlessness and sin, to restore the good life?

Yes, there is, Micah says – but it doesn’t involve a sacrifice of things or people. There’s no way, he says, to find the good life through compensation or bribe – that’s not what sacrifices and offerings were ever meant to be, anyways. No, he says, there is a simple path to return to God’s plan for his people, a simple way to find the good life God designed. “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.”<sup>3</sup>

He has shown you what is good. This isn’t something new Micah describes here – Christopher Wright says that it “only crystallizes what Israel had always known”<sup>4</sup> – but it does sum up the gist of the sort of life God says is good. And in this summary statement, we find God’s keys to living the good life, the sort of life God created us to live.

It begins with a command we find in many forms and in many places in the Scriptures, both Old and New Testament: act justly. Justice, in the biblical sense, is literally foundational. One Old Testament scholar states it this way: “If justice perished, the foundations of the whole cosmic order would disintegrate, because justice is fundamental to the very nature of the Lord, the creator of the universe and to

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<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:8

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, 304

the core of God’s government of history.”<sup>5</sup> Justice is part of God’s character, so it is an important component of the nature of all things, and certainly central to the life of God’s people.

But just what is this ‘justice’? In the Hebrew vocabulary of the Old Testament, the word for ‘justice’ is connected to righting wrongs and restoring things to the way they should have been. It is an action-oriented concept; Christopher Wright says, “In the widest sense, it means ‘to put things right’, to intervene in a situation that is wrong, oppressive or out of control and to ‘fix’ it.”<sup>6</sup> The people of Israel had seen God do just that for them – to fix a situation that wasn’t right, their slavery in Egypt – and they knew that God expected them to do the same thing. Act justly, Micah says – you know this. God has told you this.

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<sup>5</sup> Wright, 253

<sup>6</sup> Wright 256

Of course, that's not always easy. Sometimes, doing justice for someone else means we ourselves will be limited or put out. Other times, acting justly may take more effort or expose us to more anger or criticism from other folks than we want to take on. Acting justly is not always a walk in the park; it can truly cost us. But that doesn't change the fact that, according to Micah – and according to the vast majority of the Bible, including the teachings of Jesus – it is a cornerstone of living the good life. So to be faithful, we have to act justly. And that takes intentionally changing our perspective. As my mentor and teacher Cecil Sherman said in one of his Sunday School commentaries,

“We have to come to see our world through God's eyes. We see wrong where we have never noticed. We see people getting a raw deal, cheated, worked hard, and paid little. We see institutional unfairness. It bothers us. It eats on us. It keeps us awake at night. We come to

see ourselves as agents to make wrongs right. Doing what is right and fair in every part of life pleases God. [...] If we want to become acceptable to God, we have to ‘do justice.’”<sup>7</sup>

Acting justly and doing justice is at the core of finding the good life.

But it doesn’t end there. While we act justly, Micah says we also are to love mercy; other translations speak of loving kindness. These are attempts to translate the Hebrew word *hesed*, a foundational term in the Hebrew Scriptures describing the very character of God. There are elements in the word that point to loyalty, devotion, and faithfulness, as well as how such loyalty and devotion are lived out through acts of mercy and kindness. All of these pieces of what *hesed* means are tied up in the concept of a loving, devoted relationship. God is faithfully devoted to us, his people and

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<sup>7</sup> Cecil Sherman Formations Commentary, Vol. 2, p. 179-80.

his creation, and so he treats us with mercy and kindness.

To live the sort of life he designed us to live, to live the good life, then, means to live as people of *hesed*, to live as people who relate to each other faithfully and who show that faithfulness through valuing and practicing mercy and kindness.

It is important to note how closely this loving of kindness and mercy is attached to the practice of acting justly. Justice is the way the world is supposed to be, setting things to rights and protecting those who are treated unjustly by others. But, as scholar Daniel Smith-Christopher remarks, “in the modern world, it is far too easy to act with terrible harshness, even violence, and justify the act by calling it ‘justice,’” even misusing our devotion to God to validate a harsh response or a dehumanizing viewpoint towards those

we identify as unjust.<sup>8</sup> When we combine our acts of justice with a commitment to loving kindness and mercy, though, we find a path forward that doesn't just make things the way they should have been to start with; we find a path that is life-giving and life-enhancing for everyone involved. Justice combined with mercy and kindness is the justice we have received from God, and it is the justice that makes life good for us and for all those around us.

Underlying all of this discussion is the last piece of Micah's prescription for the good life: walking humbly with God. The good life cannot be completely found, Micah says, apart from a relationship with God. Over and over in the Scriptures, we find the long experience of faith described as a journey or a path. The images of God's people are as pilgrims or travelers on the road. It was true for Abraham,

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<sup>8</sup> Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, Micah commentary, location 5438 (Kindle)

Isaac, and Jacob, nomadic shepherds who first made a covenant with God. It was true for the Israelite slaves escaping Egypt, following God's direction in the wilderness. It was true for the prophets, calling the people back to faithfulness like Micah is doing here; they used the image of the road, an image that spoke to Jews in exile far from home. The disciples of Jesus were with him in his travels, and his teachings seem to have mostly come in conversations while going from here to there. And the earliest description of the people of Jesus in the early church were as followers of 'the Way.'

For all of these spiritual ancestors of ours, the idea of faith is one of a long journey with God – not a one-time experience, but a day-in, day-out relationship. The psalms sing of the blessings of a life spent in tune with God. The words of wisdom found in Proverbs and Job speak of the

blessings of living in the presence of God, even when bad things in life happen. The book of Daniel recounts how Daniel and his friends remained faithful in a foreign land, even under threat of death, because God had been faithful to them. And we ourselves know, either from our own experience or from the experience of saints we have known, that a deep and abiding relationship with God, a daily walking with him, can bring peace, joy, and a greater love than we can ever experience from another human being.

But such blessings do not happen automatically. Just as acting justly and loving mercy take effort and intention on our part, so does walking humbly with God. That shouldn't surprise us – we're talking about a relationship here, and just like any human relationship takes attention and determination, so does our relationship with God. So if we want to find the good life, the best life, then that means

doing the things that connect us to God – reading the Scriptures, spending time in prayer, walking alongside other people in the journey of faith, and following the teachings of Jesus. ~ including his commands live a life of justice and mercy.

If we will do these things – if we will ~~act justly and love mercy~~ *walk humbly with God* by acting justly & loving mercy ~~and love mercy~~ – then Micah says we have

found what is good. We know as well as Micah's original readers did that this is what the good life is. We just don't always remember. But now, in the midst of a chaotic world, I invite you to bring the teaching of Micah to mind. Alongside of the poet, the world asks us, and we even ask ourselves, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"<sup>9</sup> The best answer we can give is to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. The best thing we can do is find the good life.

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Oliver, "The Summer Day"