

“The Fruit of the Spirit: Kindness”
Micah 6:1-8
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Last month we began our series on the fruit of the Spirit, based on this year’s Vacation Bible School theme. In Galatians 5 Paul gives us the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (5.22-23). Though these nine characteristics are listed separately, they each describe different aspects of the same thing, what a Christ-filled life looks like. There’s a reason why love is listed first - as Jesus taught us, the greatest commandment is that we love God with all our hearts, with all our souls and all our minds; and that we love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22.37-40).

This morning we turn to the fruit of kindness. In 1 Corinthians 13 Paul says, “Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast...” Kindness is an expression of love in the world, and as you know, our world desperately is in need of deep kindness. While there are many descriptions of kindness in the New Testament, we are going to focus on one of the bedrock passages of the Old Testament, Micah 6. In a dramatic way the Hebrew prophet Micah describes what it is that God desires for us, not just in our lives individually but as communities of faith. Spoiler alert: it has a lot to do with kindness! Let us turn now to this passage which can be found in your bulletin insert, and I invite you to read the parts that are in bold. Let us listen now for God’s Word:

Micah 6:1-8 *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

Hear what the Lord says:

“Rise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.
Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the Lord has a case against his people, and he will contend with Israel.

**“O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of
slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.**

O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord.”

**“With what shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?**

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

**He has told you, O mortal, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but
to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?**

You know, sometimes life just is not fair, is it? Those who are doing wrong seem to be prospering, or at least getting away with it, and those who are faithful seem to be getting the short end of the stick. Whether it's the bully in school who knows how to play the teacher, or the big corporations who make profits while exploiting those working for cheap labor, life sometimes is just not fair.

This was the case back in the 8th century BCE, when the people of Israel saw their enemies rising while the kingdom of Israel struggled under their attacks. Eventually both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel would be defeated, the Temple destroyed, and God's people would be taken away into exile. And in the midst of this chaos the people had a beef with God. How could this happen to God's chosen people? How can this be?? Bible scholars believe that most of the Old Testament was written in an attempt to answer this tough question: *how could God's chosen people be kicked out of their land when God was the one who had promised it to them in the first place!?* People today still wrestle with this question of theodicy, the so-called problem of evil. In the midst of the tragedies we experience in life, we can question God's goodness and justice or even God's very existence.

Yes, the people of Israel had a grievance against God, but instead of simply shutting them down God (through the prophet Micah) is willing to listen to them and even engage them in their struggles. Micah chapter 6 begins with the Lord inviting Israel to plead their case, to bring their lawsuit out into the open, to put it before a jury consisting of the mountains and the hills. And who better to hear the trial than some of the oldest members of creation who have been around for a long time?! (Daniel Simundson, [New Interpreter's Bible, Vol VII](#), p. 578) The hills and the mountains were around when the people and God made their covenant together, so they certainly could be fair judges in this dispute.

And so in response to the people's cries, the Lord does something remarkable. Instead of giving a long and thorough rationale of why the people should trust God, the Lord cuts to the heart of the matter: "*O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me!*" You can hear the pain of a heart-broken parent who feels like their child has betrayed them. God then briefly reminds Israel of all the things God has done in saving and loving the people: "*For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.*" God triumphed over the foreign kings like Balak of Moab and successfully delivered them into the promised land. If the people could only remember these and other saving acts of God, then they would not doubt God's ongoing presence and power in their lives.

And in response to God's powerful presentation, someone stands up on behalf of the people (perhaps it was a priest) and asks the million dollar question: *What exactly are you requiring of us, O Lord, so that we might remain in good relationship with you?* Do we need to come with fine offerings, like an expensive one-year-old calf? Or would it be better if we brought thousands of rams? Or better yet 10,000 rivers of oil?! You can see that the people's representative is escalating things pretty quickly. And can you imagine what would cost more than 10K rivers of oil?! Could it be the costly sacrifice of your first born child to the Lord, like Abraham was

willing to do? The people's representative pleads, "Lord, if we brought all of these things to sacrifice to you, would that be enough to restore our broken relationship?"

And in response to the people's question, the Lord's legal team says this. "It's no secret, the Lord has already told you what is required to keep the holy covenant, to stay in right relationship with me! *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?*" Throughout the scriptures Micah and the other prophets make the point again and again that "God is more interested in the way the people live their everyday lives than in their religious practices" (Simundson, p. 580). But here's the deal: the call to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God is much harder than it sounds. And it's much harder than just going through the motions of coming to church, putting some money in the offering plate, and doing an occasional act of service once in a while. No, God calls for the dedication of our whole lives, not just on Sundays but 24/7 (Simundson, p. 583). So in response to the people's question of why judgment has fallen on their nation, the prophets were clear that God's people failed to live out their commitments to love God and love neighbor. Their leaders were not defending the cause of the poor - they were not taking care of those most vulnerable in the land, they were not showing kindness and mercy to the stranger, and because of their unfaithfulness judgment fell on them. Amos goes so far as to say that God even hates our religiosity - our festivals and solemn assemblies, our songs and even the melody of our harps - these are all worthless. Instead of these things, God calls for justice to roll down like water, and righteousness like an everflowing stream (Amos 5:21-24; 2:6-7).

Now the Hebrew word *hesed* (חֶסֶד) is one of the most important words in the whole Old Testament. Though it is often translated as kindness, there's no single word in English that captures the depth of *hesed* (biblehub.com). Some interpreters translate it as mercy or loving-kindness, and it can refer to God's relationship to us, such as God's steadfast love that never ceases (Lamentations 3:22). And this word can also describe our relationship to others, the loving-kindness we express to those who are in need. - the steadfast love that we can extend to others around us in very practical and real ways. There are two things about this type of deep, steadfast kindness I want to share with you, in hopes that it may encourage us to better live as the people God is calling us to be.

First of all, throughout the Bible God is always the one who takes the initiative in showing us kindness, extending steadfast love to us. Just as God sent Moses to rescue the people from slavery, God sent Jesus to set us free from our sins. God's saving love always comes first, and we are called to make a response to this love by extending this same kind of love and kindness to others. First, it's God's loving kindness towards us, then it's our loving kindness towards others, including ourselves. The order is important because we are not to be out there trying to win God's approval by doing kind and loving things, trying to earn enough points to make us worthy to be loved (Simundson, pp. 582-83). No, the amazing grace of God we celebrate at the baptism font each week is that God names and claims us as beloved children before we can do anything!

The second thing I want to say about our call to share kindness with the world is that God's call to kindness is deep. We live in a world where it's easy to stay on the surface of things: to do random acts of kindness in one-off, trivial ways. Maybe we can post a picture of a kindness meme, or do a one-time thing like buying a present for a needy kid at Christmas time, but never actually spend time getting to know kids who are in need in our community. In his book [Deep Kindness](#) author Houston Kraft says that while these random acts of kindness can be beautiful and uplifting, they are often fleeting and scattered, much like confetti. He believes that random acts of kindness should be complemented by deeper, more intentional acts that have a lasting impact. I agree with him, and I think his book has lots of practical tools for practicing kindness in positive ways. And I believe this type of deep kindness is truly a fruit of the Spirit - it's kindness as an active expression of love - it requires deliberate and thoughtful action, deep listening to the other and understanding their thoughts and feelings ([Deep Kindness summary via Microsoft Bing](#)). And when we take the time to do such deep and kind actions, watch out - the world will change!

When I was a senior in high school I had to face my first major life decision, where I was going to go to college. My dad always loved the University of South Carolina, and my sister went there, so I thought that would be the place to go. My parents married later in life and were older than most, and though they had worked hard their whole lives, they couldn't save much for our education. But in the fall of my senior year, one of my teachers by the name of Rex Crews extended an act of deep kindness that forever changed the trajectory of my life. Mr. Crews knew about a school in NC called Davidson, and with my parents' approval he took a day off of school to drive me to Davidson for a required admission's visit. He encouraged me to apply for a scholarship, the only way my family could afford to send me there. Davidson was nowhere on my radar, but with his kind initiative Mr Crews helped to open up the door that led to me to go to Davidson, where I would meet Julie and begin to wrestle with my call to ministry.

In the early 1960s an MIT professor by the name of Edward Lorenz discovered a powerful insight about the way nature works: small changes can have large consequences. The idea came to be known as the 'butterfly effect' after Lorenz suggested that the flap of a butterfly's wings somewhere in the world might have the capacity to be the first part of a chain of events that could eventually lead to a tornado ([Peter Dizikes, MIT News February 22, 2011](#)). Thanks to Rev. Keith Grogg for sharing this story).

My friends, the same thing is true for seemingly small acts of kindness. In a world that is full of anxiety and fear, division and unkindness, how might God be calling us to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly together? Thanks be to the God who is able to take our seemingly small offerings of kindness and turn them into mighty acts of the Spirit!

Amen.