

Micah 6:8 (NIV, NRSV)

⁸He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To do justice, and to love mercy [*hesed*],
and to walk humbly with your God.

Psalm 136: 1-2, 23-26 (NRSV)

¹ O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.
² O give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.
²³ It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever;
²⁴ and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever;
²⁵ who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.
²⁶ O give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love [*hesed*] endures forever.

Matthew 9:9-13 (NRSV)

⁹As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him.

¹⁰And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. ¹¹When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” ¹²But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.”

Are we faithful and loyal? Do we look after the interests of others? Do we love mercy?

Three phrases: do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God. They provide substance to a Christ-shaped life, yet they came from a prophet writing more than 700 years before Jesus. Last week, we considered what God means by “doing justice.” This week, we turn to “loving mercy.” Grasping the meaning of this second phrase entails understanding the meaning of one of the most important of all Hebrew words in the Bible: *hesed* (pronounced *che-sed*). Micah 6:8 calls for us to “love *hesed*.” The English words that we use in 6:8 such as “mercy” (NIV) or “kindness” (NRSV) are attempts to do the impossible, for no single English word can really do justice to the meaning of *hesed*. The CEB translators wisely use a couple of words, “faithful love,” but even those fall short.

I’ve included a sampling of verses from Psalm 136, a poem that is built upon the single word *hesed* to capture the essential nature of God’s love. It is a “steadfast love/*hesed*” that endures forever. This sort of love is faithful, unwavering, and sure. It is a love that seeks the well-being of others. It is active, in that *hesed* is not an attitude to be held, but an action to be performed. *Hesed* is a social word, lived out in relationship in community. *Hesed* is a love that endures; it is loyal. It is a covenantal love. Used 245 times in the Old Testament, *hesed* is most often used to speak of God’s love for humanity.¹

When God reveals his deeper character to Moses at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 34), God proclaims: “The LORD, the LORD: a God who is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding with *hesed* and faithfulness, keeping *hesed* to the thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6). This foundational statement

¹ from Mary Donovan Turner’s excellent book, *Old Testament Words*. Chalice Press. 2003.

about God's love is to be a foundational statement of our love as well. We too are to abound with *hesed*, the loyal covenantal love that looks to the interests of others. In two words, literally "love *hesed*," Micah says so much about what it means to be God's people.

Hesed in the New Testament

Obviously, *hesed* is a Hebrew word and the New Testament was written in Greek. Still, about 150-200 years before Jesus, the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt, translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek so that more of the Jews who lived outside Palestine could read them. This Greek translation of the Old Testament is known as the Septuagint (from the Latin for "seventy; LXX is a common abbreviation), for the legend was that the translation was done by seventy Jewish scholars, each working independently and arriving at identical translations. The Septuagint was the Hebrew Bible used and quoted by the NT authors.

In the Septuagint, the Greek word *eleos* is almost always used for the Hebrew *hesed*. For the Greeks, *eleos* was an emotion "aroused by undeserved affliction in others."² The NT writers use *eleos* (such as in Matthew 9:13 above) for the attitude God requires of us, as in Micah 6:8. It is a kindness/mercy owed in *mutual* relationships. It isn't surprising that the NT uses *eleos* in this very Jewish way, as all the NT writers, with the exception of Luke, were Jewish.

Matthew the Tax Collector

The tax collector. You could hardly find a more despised person in all of Judea and Galilee than a tax collector. It wasn't so much the taxes, as it was the way the collectors went about collecting them and more.

Tax collectors were entrepreneurs. They would enter into a contract with the Roman authorities to collect the taxes due Rome. They were free to collect/extort any amount that they could get away with. The tax collectors would keep for themselves all amounts over what was due Rome. As I said, the tax collectors were an entrepreneurial bunch.

Thus, we aren't surprised by John the Baptists' reply when tax collectors came to be baptized and asked what they ought to do. John said, "Don't collect anymore than you are required to" (Luke 3:12-13, NIV). When the tax collector, Zacchaeus, comes to faith in the Lord, he promises to repay four-fold all those whom he has cheated (Luke 19:1-9).

"Go and learn what this means"

It is a typical day for Jesus. He passes by a tax collector, Matthew, and says to him, "Follow me." Then, Jesus goes to have lunch with Matthew and some of his buddies. Like Matthew, they too are tax collectors and other sorts of "wrong" folks. Tax collectors, you see, were a despised bunch, seen as sell-outs to Rome and exploiters of their fellow Jews.

Some Pharisees see all this and decide to confront Jesus' disciples, asking them why Jesus insists on eating with all these sinners.

Jesus overhears the question and turns to confront the Pharisees himself. "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' Jesus is sending his critics to the scroll containing the writings of the prophet Hosea. In 6:6, God says, "I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God instead of burnt offerings." Jesus didn't come for the healthy, but for the sick; for sinners, not the righteous.

We probably don't see it, but Jesus' reply to the Pharisees is sharp and pointed, even insulting. Have they even read Hosea? Don't they know God? Don't they know what God wants from us? If they did, they would know what Jesus is doing having lunch with these tax collectors. God loves even them.

Leon Morris helps us get a little deeper into Jesus' reply:

² Kittle and Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged in one volume by Geoffrey Bromiley. Eerdmans. 1985.

Go and learn does not mean “go off on a journey” but is a call for a genuine effort to understand. Jesus proceeds to quote from Hosea 6:6, where the prophet looks for God’s people to show love and loyalty. In the first instance this will mean that they should love the God who loves them so much. But this means also that they should love other people as God loves them. So it is that Jesus looks for the self-satisfied Pharisees to show compassion to the outcasts instead of rejecting them so firmly. He makes that clear when he goes on to outline his own procedure.

I did not come points to his existence before he “came” to this world and sums up the essence of his mission (cf. 5:17). When he left his heavenly abode to come to earth, this was not in order to congratulate people like the Pharisees who were so well satisfied with themselves and so ready to condemn all who failed to measure up to their finicky standards. Nor indeed was it to deal with people who were genuinely right with God. Rather, his business was with sinners, those who must produce repentance if they were to be saved.

The attitude of the Pharisees was such that these people were left far from God; they made no attempt to bring them near. Since they were ready to let these people die in their sins, their attitude lacked compassion and thus failed to comply with the standards taught by the prophet they professed to honor so highly. This failure meant that in fact the Pharisees belonged among the people Hosea condemned—a startling accusation for these so outwardly religious people! Luke tells us that Jesus came to call the sinful people “to repentance” (Luke 5:32), but Matthew lets this be understood. He leaves his emphasis on the fact that the people Jesus came to call were *sinners*. Later we find that he came to die for them (20:28). Jesus never said that the people in question were anything other than sinful. But that was not the point. The point was that he came to save sinners.³

Doing mercy/hesed

Matthew follows Jesus’ sharp retort to the Pharisees with a story of God’s loyal love, his *hesed*, at work. This is what mercy looks like. Jesus is talking with some followers of John the Baptist when a local VIP charges into the room, humbles himself before Jesus, and asks that he come and bring the man’s dead daughter back to life. Jesus simply goes. Yes, there is always time for mercy.

As Jesus is hurrying on his way to the VIP’s daughter, a woman pushes her way through the crowd. The woman has struggled with bleeding for twelve years. Even worse, her bleeding has rendered her unclean. Like Matthew the tax collector, the woman is an outcast in her own village.

Because the woman was ritualistically unclean and untouchable, you can almost picture some people in the crowd struggling to avoid her touch as she surges toward Jesus. Coming up from behind, she touches Jesus’ clothing, believing, as did her contemporaries, that Jesus’ power would be carried even in his clothing. Though the woman trusted that by touching Jesus’ clothing she would be healed, in what must have been a moment of overwhelming joy, she is healed instantly and feels the overwhelming power of that healing. Jesus senses the woman’s touch, turns to her, and affirms that her faith has made her well.

There is more to Jesus’ act of mercy than meets the eye, more than mere kindness. The woman’s healing is more than physical. No longer will she be unclean. She will be taken back into the community. She will find wholeness and salvation. Her steadfast faith in the power of Jesus will enable her to begin rebuilding right relationships with her neighbors and loved ones.

Hardly missing a beat, Jesus arrives at the VIP’s house where a crowd laughs at Jesus when he suggests the girl is sleeping, not dead. But I guess they stopped laughing when Jesus went into the house and restored life to the young girl.

³ Morris, L. (1992). *The Gospel according to Matthew* (pp. 221–222). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

These acts make concrete the words from Hosea: God wants mercy/*hesed*/faithful love, not sacrifice. The healings are all about restoring these people to wholeness and life, to *shalom*. In what ways can we embrace genuinely faithful love? How might we restore the dead, the lost, the lonely to life and community?

Do justice, embrace faithful love, and walk humbly with God.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. If a friend asked you to help them understand the Hebrew word, *hesed*, what would you tell them? How do ideas of loyalty and covenant help us to hear Micah's meaning? There are other words Micah could have chosen. Why this one, do you think? *Hesed* is fundamental to God's character. It describes who God really is? How can it become fundamental to our own character?
2. In Micah 6:8, the NIV translators use "mercy" to render *hesed*. What does "mercy" mean to you? Do you usually think of it as a word dealing with matters of punishment? The Bible uses the word in a very broad sense, which we see in the various translations. To be merciful is to be kind and caring, to extend to others compassion and understanding that we hope would be extended to us. We live in a world that often seems so uncaring and unkind. Why is kindness and mercy so difficult for so many people? Do we always make time for mercy?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: God's lovingkindness, his "hesed"

Monday, Exodus 34:1-9 God's character is more fully revealed.

Tuesday, Joshua 2 In v. 12, Rahab asks that the *hesed* she has shown the Israelites be done for her.

Wednesday, Ruth 1 In v. 8, Naomi says to Ruth "May Yahweh always do *hesed* to you."

Thursday, Psalm 136 The line, "God's steadfast love endure forever" was probably sung as a response.

Friday, Hosea 6:4-7:10 God accuses his people of infidelity. Verse 6 is about God's *hesed*/faithful love.

Saturday, Matthew 9:14-26 The stories that immediately follow Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Exodus.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the story of Esther.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Our current series: *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Kings of Israel*