



Fix Your Focus: Biblical Humility

Deuteronomy 8:1-6

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

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Over the past few months, I've spent a lot of time questioning how it is we arrived at the intersectional point where we find ourselves today. How is it that we brought this liminal period of time upon ourselves? When I say *intersectional* point, what I mean is, a time when we have so many compounding issues bearing down on us at the same time. We are dealing with one of the most heated presidential elections in our nation's history. We are dealing with one of the worst pandemics our nation has ever faced. We are dealing with the continual refusal of our nation to name and end systemic oppression and racial inequity. We are dealing with an economic crises, where businesses are continuing to close and families are struggling to put food on the table. Add to all of this, we have, due to COVID, and inability for us to gather with one another in meaningful and restorative ways. There is no *one* crisis that is creating the turmoil, exhaustion, and grief we all feel – it is a compounding weight amplified by a variety of concerns. I don't know about you, but if I'm being honest, I'm exhausted. And frankly, I'm over it ... even knowing it's not ending anytime soon.

And I can't help but wonder, why? How did we get here?

In some ways, this questioning led me to the text we've been focusing on over the past month, found in Micah 6:8. The people of Israel, who were about to be overcome by the Babylonians and forced into exile, were in a not-so-different situation. From failed leadership, to selfishness and communal despair, to a loss of national well-being, the Israelites were facing a similar liminal period of time, which presented a number of intersecting concerns.

To the Israelites in their pre-exile struggles, Micah was naming a way forward to avoid further complications. Not only was Micah directing them on a path to a non-exilic future – a future that could possibly avoid the exile – Micah names why it is they are headed down such a disastrous path. The challenges they are facing, the certainty of the impending exile, is due to their lack of faithfulness to the covenant – to God's covenant. If they want to right the ship (so to speak), they need to refocus on the purpose of the covenant, which Micah summarizes in three concise instructions: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Oh, that we would hear the prophet's instructions anew today for our own avoidance of any further destruction within our own national walls, a future that could mimic an even greater exile than we are already facing due to this COVID virus.

We've talked about the Biblical vision of justice, and what it means to *do* justice. We've talked about the Biblical witness of mercy, and what it means to *love* mercy. Now we turn to humility.

What is the Biblical understanding of humility, and how does one walk with such humility in relationship with God?

This word, *humility*, in many ways, is harder to define than justice or mercy. Going back to the original Hebrew text, the word justice – *mishpat* – shows up over 400 times. The word mercy – *hesed* – shows up some 250 times. But the Hebrew word used in Micah 6:8 for humble – *tsana'* (saw-na') – only appears **twice** in the entire Hebrew Scriptures of the Old Testament. TWICE. So, while we have a lot of context to understand what Micah meant with the words justice and mercy, to understand Micah's instruction of walking *humbly* with God, we've got very little to go on.

The other use of the word comes in Proverbs 11:2. In that passage, which reads, "When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble," the word *tsana'* is pitted against pride. Pride and disgrace are opposed to (or opposite of) wisdom and humility.

In looking for another connection, because there just isn't a lot here to help us glean some greater advice from Micah, I turned to the Septuagint, which is the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. This was the version of the Biblical text translated for Greek speaking Jews in the years prior to the advent of Christ. So, how did the early Jews understand this relatively unused Hebrew word? How did they translate it into another relevant language of the time? In the Greek translation of Micah 6:8, I found a very nuanced translation for the word *humbly*. The Greek translation, which replaces the Hebrew word *tsana'* with the Greek word *hetoimon*, reads quite literally as "be prepared to walk with your Lord." It's a word that indicates a readiness to take instruction. Kind of like one's leader saying, 'stand back and stand by,' there's an invitation to know that dear leader is about to give direction.

In this way, *humility* is a willingness to put one's own agenda on hold for the purpose of the agenda of another. In this way, *humility* is a holding off of one's personal desires for the sake of implementing another's desires. In this way, *humility* is the deliberate lack of action in anticipation of the advisement to action from another.

This matches up with Proverbs 11, which pits humility against pride. Humility is an acknowledgement that your way, your ideas, your desires, your well-being are not central. It's lowering yourself down with a conceptual grasp that someone else has a path that is more righteous than any one you might conceive of for yourself.

And, though the Hebrew word *tsana'* is not used at length, or in any other places throughout the Biblical text directly, the idea of humility – this idea of lowering our own selfish ambition or self-righteous ways for the sake of the other – for the sake of *God's way* – this is central to the Old Testament text. This concept is the centering theme of our text from Deuteronomy 8, which Christie read for us this morning.

Deuteronomy is the fifth book of the Jewish Torah, the foundational law that lays out the relationship expectations between God and God's created, and *between* God's created (one to

another). It contains the sermons of Moses as the people continued to wander in the wilderness, prior to their arrival in the promised land. It is offered on the boundary of the rich life that lies in the future land ahead, and the difficult past life of the wilderness.ⁱ You can hear this coming transition named at the start of this text, as Moses offers, “This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe, so that you may live and increase, and go in and occupy the land that the Lord promised as an oath to your ancestors.”

As he has done before, Moses is again offering this caveat to their arrival in the promised land. *If you want to go in – if you want to finally arrive at the abundance God has planned for you – you must observe the commandment that you’ve been offered.* If they refuse this invitation, it wouldn’t be the first time they were turned away and led back into the wilderness. In Deuteronomy 1, the people failed to trust God, and their lack of trust in God led to their continued wandering in the wilderness. It’s happened before, it could happen again.

Moses, though speaking of the full breadth of God’s commandments in this text, is certainly centering the first, which names, “I am the Lord your God.” “Moses returns again and again to the connection between obedience and life.”ⁱⁱ If you cannot center yourself on God, if you cannot focus yourself on God, if you cannot put God at the forefront of your life, you will never inherit the fullness of life God desires for you – which, at that moment, for the Israelites on the precipice of the promised land, meant entering into the land flowing with milk and honey.

In his sermons, Moses is never one to let an opportunity pass without reminding the people of God’s steadfastness to the covenant. In verses two through four, Moses recalls God’s action from the past, “Remember that God has led you these forty years in the wilderness ... he humbled you by letting you hunger, then feeding you with manna, which you didn’t even know existed at the time. It was a reminder that one does not live by bread alone, but also by the very word of the Lord.”

Though not the same Hebrew word, we see the word humility show up in the English translation of this verse, “God humbled you by letting you hunger.” The Hebrew word here is *’anah*. Dr. Robert Alter, professor of Hebrew at UC Berkeley, says that this Hebrew verb is more akin to *afflict* than *humble*.ⁱⁱⁱ What Moses is saying, according to Dr. Alter, is that God *afflicted* the Israelites with hunger. It is the same verb used to define God’s action with Abraham and Isaac, where-in God *afflicted* Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his only son. Here in Deuteronomy 8, Moses seems to be insisting that such affliction leads to the recognition that God is in charge.

It is this recognition of who is in charge that Christ picks up on when using these words of Moses in rebuke of Satan. Christ says, “man does not live by bread alone, but by the very word of God,” when denying the invitation of Satan to claim earthly powers for himself. Christ had been in the wilderness for forty days fasting when Satan tempted him to wield power for his own temporal gain. And though food is a necessity for life, a reality Moses does not deny, what Moses and Christ are both highlighting is that, at the core of life, “The issue is not spiritual versus material food, but trust in the Lord’s provision and obedience versus reliance upon

self.”^{iv} “Fidelity to God is an internal, spiritual matter as Jesus demonstrates in his refusal to be tempted by the physical displays of power with which Satan attempts to bait him.”^v That God provides for us both the internal and the external needs should point us back to the first commandment – God is Lord.

This constant reminder by Moses is echoed one final time in our scripture reading today. In verses 5-6, Moses offers, “Know then in your heart that as a parent disciplines a child so the Lord your God disciplines you. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him.”

God is faithful, as a parent is to a child. Perhaps we have too many examples of perverted parental relationships today to even fully comprehend this promise of Moses, but Moses is offering a statement of divine commitment. God will not fail. No matter how often we fail, God will not fail, nor turn a back to us. And yes, this text, and many in the Old Testament, pick up on the retribution of God. “There is not one god of abundance and another god of want, but one God who blesses and curses.”^{vi} It is clear that God has a path for humanity, a path that rejects individualism and praises communalism ... a path that rejects human power and praises divine authority ... a path that rejects hierarchical structures and praises a shared communal responsibility ... a path that rejects human exceptionalism and applauds corporate shalom.

And perhaps that is part of our struggle, part of how we have ended up in our current situation that can best be defined as “2020.” Everything we claim as right about American culture is definitively wrong by Biblical standards.

What Moses is defining as necessary to move from the struggle of the wilderness into the inherent goodness of the promised land is humility. Moses is saying we need to be prepared to take orders from God, instead of thinking we have all the right answers. Moses is declaring that we have to stop thinking we are the preeminent, but instead to fully rely on God, who is unsurpassed. Moses is saying that our building up for ourselves is not what God desires, but that God desires for us to look for sufficiency in the Creator, the Redeemer, the one who is the Sustainer.

The humility that Micah is talking about is a reflection on the Torah, the law that God had already laid out – plain and clear – for the people of Israel. For God to be preparing to exile the people *out* of the promised land in Micah 6 is indicative that they haven’t heeded Moses’ advice from the time *before they entered* the promised land. And though the Torah includes a number of lengthy sermons that lay out the law to govern the covenant of God and God’s created, at the core of this text in Deuteronomy, “Moses suggests that life in covenantal relationship to God orients one’s heart as well as one’s mind and spirit. And when the community fails to embody faithfulness to that covenantal relationship, one’s heart – indeed, one’s very life – is in a state of affliction.”^{vii}

Why are we, as a nation – as a community – in a state of affliction today? How did we get here? ... Simply stated, we have not embodied faithfulness to the covenantal relationship. We have

failed to respond to the invitation of humility – to act, not on our own behalf, not on our family’s behalf, not on our “people’s” behalf, but on the behalf of the one who created us. We have failed to even *be prepared* to walk with God.

So, back to Micah, how do we avoid exile – further exile? Micah says, you know what is good, you know what the Lord has told you: to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

So, how does one walk with such humble readiness with God? How do we embody humility?

This will be our focus next week, as we conclude our worship series on Micah 6:8. But in short, as a glimpse of what Micah is instructing, we have a witness to this kind of humble walk in Jesus Christ. What does it mean to be ready to walk with God? Friends, we don’t have to look far, for the gospels are filled with such a witness. And, spoiler alert, such a humble walk is not only freeing for the self, it doesn’t just give you freedom. Such humility, such readiness to follow in the way of God, it’s a gift to the community; it’s freeing for humanity. So let us give thanks for the witness of Christ, even as we wrestle with what it means for us to walk with humility before the Lord. Amen.

ⁱ Patrick D. Miller. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Deuteronomy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Telford Work. *Deuteronomy: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018.

^{iv} Miller.

^v Deanna A. Thompson. *Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Deuteronomy*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014.

^{vi} Work.

^{vii} Thompson.