

Seeing What God Sees - 10/4/2009

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Well, there's the movie that you can't get. Kind of odd to be – I bet you wish you really could get that now, don't you? Get into a group.

We're starting this series on Compassion by Command. The title of this message is Seeing What God Sees. The titles for these messages were planned out a while ago, and we're going according to the booklet, so that's the official title. Sometimes the message will correspond to the title closely, other times not so much. This morning's is not so much. So I would like to subtitle this Justice, Humility, and Compassion, or Justice, Compassion, and Humility. It comes out of Micah chapter six, verse eight. A very famous passage that reads like this: "He has shown all you people what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? This is what's good. What does the Lord require of you? "To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. That's what the Lord requires of you." To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Pray with me here a moment.

Father, we pray, God, that every person in this auditorium and every person who may be listening through podcast or some other means that you will open up our ears and open up our hearts to receive your word, and we pray, God, that the kingdom would come, invade our lives, and that you would teach us what it is to walk justly and what it is to love mercy and what it is to be humble. And, God, that you'd help us to wake up to the many ways, maybe, in which our culture has indoctrinated us and the powers behind the culture have co-opted us and have kept us from living out the just, the merciful, and the humble kingdom. Wake us up, Lord. In Jesus' name, we pray. And all God's people said amen.

What does the Lord require of thee? To act justly. That means to live with a view towards justice, to promote justice. It means to confront justice and to confront oppression. It means to live in a way where you strive to alleviate inequities. That's what it is to live justly.

To love mercy. Mercy has the connotation of, on the one hand, of forgiveness where you give someone not what they deserve but, rather, you express kindness towards them, but also has the general connotation of just being compassionate, to have mercy on someone who is less fortunate than you. It's to be compassionate.

What does the Lord require of us? To act justly, to love compassion. Not just be compassionate but to love being compassionate and merciful.

And then, to walk humbly. To walk humbly means you just walk in a way that's free of arrogance, free of judgmentalism, and free of self righteousness. That's what the Lord requires of you. Act justly, be compassionate, and be humble.

Now, what is interesting to me is that that answers the main thing that Micah says the Lord wants of us, but it's not the main answer that many people today would give to the question what does the Lord require of you. My suspicion is that if you were to ask most Christians what does the Lord require of us or the way we phrase it today is more along the lines of how do you get saved, the answers would be along the lines of what we believe, here's what the Lord wants us to believe. You need to believe the right things. That's the important thing because that's how you get saved. So you need to believe certain things about Jesus and believe certain things about the Bible and believe certain things about, maybe, eschatology, the rapture, and creation, and whatever, and those beliefs are all fine and good, but you wouldn't find Micah's answer, I don't think, at the forefront of most people's answers today. They might have some behaviors: You have to believe the right things, and you also need a quiet time with God, do your devotions, maybe talk a little bit about standing up for particular causes; but I don't think, on the whole, most Christians in the west today would answer the question what does the Lord require of us by saying, well, we need to live to promote justice and confront injustice and confront oppression and show compassion to the poor and walk humble. But it is the main answer that Micah gives. In fact, it is the main answer that the Bible on the whole gives. A lot of people don't realize this, but the Bible from beginning to end emphasizes this as much as any other topic you'll find. There are over 400 distinct passages in the Bible that address issues of poverty and greed and wealth and responsibility. Over 3,000 particular verses address this topic. The Bible is saturated with this over and over and over again. God calls his people to practice justice, to have a heart for the poor, to provide housing for the homeless and food for those who are hungry and to care for the widows and those that are under oppression. The Bible is saturated, just saturated with that theme. In fact, greed is the second most frequently mentioned sin in the Bible. The first one is idolatry, and I would argue that greed, actually, is simply a form of idolatry. It's pervasive in the Bible. In fact, the number one reason why God judges nations in the old testament is because of their greed. Greed is, simply, a matter of hoarding more than you need when there are people who have less than they need, hoarding more food than you need when there are people who are hungry. That's called gluttony. Hoarding more resources than you need when there are people who don't have enough resources, that is greed. And the number one reason why God judges nations in the old testament, including Israel, is because of their greed. This is a topic that is central to God's heart. I don't think you can get a topic that is more central to God's heart than this one. And here's where I have to be very honest with you. I am just puzzled, perplexed, bewildered sometimes by some of the priorities that it seems modern western Christians have. Our priorities, sometimes, strike me as being screwed up. This doesn't seem to be on the forefront

of a lot of people's passions. I would think, wouldn't you, that, you know, for people who read the Bible and believe the Bible and that they would share the values of the Bible and, if that's the case, you know, I would think we would be hearing more about this, especially when you consider this: If ever there has been a nation, remember the number one reason why God judges nations in the old testament is because of greed, if ever there was a nation in history that could arguably be accused of greed, hoarding more resources than you need when there are people who don't have as much as they need, I would think it would be America, possibly. And, if ever there was a people, a group of Christians who are guilty of a particular sin, I would think it would be greed and would be among modern American Christians. We live in a standard of living that is four times the global average, and yet, all of the studies show that we spend, on average, 97 percent of our income on ourselves. So the number one reason why God judges nations and America is in that category, and God's people in America are in that category, and so wouldn't you think that people who share the values of scripture, given how saturated the Bible is with this emphasis, wouldn't you think that Christians would be just confronting the injustice in the church and getting just passionate about this topic and saying we need to be living this out and, if they're going to be taking it to the streets, they'd be out there on behalf of the homeless and those who are in poverty situations. You would think that their feathers, our feathers would be getting ruffled over this topic. Seems to me that we don't get very bothered by this topic. Honestly. It seems – what gets a lot of Christians, my impression anyways, is that what gets a lot of Christians, their feathers ruffled, what gets them passionate about some stuff is when they, you know, go after gay rights. They're passionate about that. They'll take that one to the streets. But this one, not so much. There's a lot of energy and emotion that gets poured into that, and yet, having done all that, to go back, and many don't even question their lifestyle, their own lifestyle, the houses they live in, what they do with their resources. There's something wrong with this picture. Three thousand verses that deal with poverty. There is, at most, six that address homosexuality. What's wrong with this picture? There's a lack of perspective on this. And I'm not trying to condone homosexuality, by any means. I'm just saying there's something wrong when we ourselves are so potentially indicted by this thing that is so central to God, and yet, rather than looking at ourselves in the mirror and saying how would God have us change, we want to scapegoat and deflect responsibility and go after these folks and say how they have to change.

Here's the irony of this. Here's the irony. We get the word sodomy, which has been, for the last couple hundred of years, synonymous with homosexuality. We get that word from the city of Sodom. Which, along with Sodom and Gomorrah, was an act, in Genesis 19, judged; and the traditional interpretation was it was judged for its homosexuality, and there's some indications in Genesis 19 that that has something to do with it. But, here's the irony. The one passage that flushes out in some detail why God judged Sodom does not mention homosexuality. What it does mention is greed. Here's what the verse says: "As surely as I live, declares the sovereign

Lord, your sister Sodom," he's talking to the Israelites here, "your sister Sodom and her daughters never did what you and your daughters have done." In other words, he's saying to his people, you are in a worse situation than Sodom was because you're not practicing justice and showing mercy. He goes, "Now, this was the sin of your sisters Sodom." Listen to this. "She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned." Arrogant; they did not walk humbly with the Lord. Overfed and unconcerned; they didn't act just, and they didn't show compassion. "They were haughty and did detestable things before Me." They did not help the poor and needy. "They were haughty and did detestable things before Me." Did not care about the needy and the poor is, to God, detestable; therefore, he says, "I did away with them as you have done."

Here's the irony. If ever there was a nation that was guilty of the sin of Sodom, it's this one. And if ever there were a group of Christians who were guilty of the sin of Sodom, it's this one. And yet, you get the impression, from a lot of Christians today, that the only sin of Sodom that we should be concerned with are those who are guilty with that sin that is mentioned three times in the new testament, and we ourselves are sometimes guilty of the sin that is mentioned 3,000 times. What's wrong with this picture? I almost, honestly, entitled this message "Will the Real Sodomites Please Stand Up?" But I thought that might offend some people, and you know I never like to offend people. Okay. So – but do you see the irony of this? We are guilty of the sin of Sodom, many of us, anyways, and let's confess it as a nation and as a church, and yet, rather than looking in the mirror and saying, God, point out the sin in us. We're scapegoating and deflecting responsibility and pinning it on other people. It's time for this to change. It's time for us to gain a holistic, Biblical perspective and begin to share God's heart for the poor. And I'm not trying to minimize any sin whatsoever. I'm just saying, this is Matthew 7 on steroids, when Jesus says don't go looking for the speck in your neighbor's eye but look at the two by four in your own eye, it's time for us to say let's deal with our two by four in our own eye. This should get our feathers ruffled up. This should get our passions going. This should get the fire going in our lives.

This series is all about that. It's about Micah 6. It's about learning how to act justly and live with compassion and to walk humbly. It's asking the question what does it look like here and now for us to act just and to be compassionate and to be humble, and how do we move forward in the radical kingdom on growing in this? It's all about that.

I want to now focus on, for the remainder of this message, focus on the last part of Micah 6, the part about humility. Because sometimes I think when we look at Micah 6 that is sort of seen as the addendum. The important thing is to act just and to love mercy. Walking humbly is sort of seen as, oh, yeah, a little addendum. But I believe it's as central as the other two. In fact, I will argue that we can't do the first two unless we do the third. It's our lack of humility, I believe,

that, to a large degree, keeps us from living justly and loving mercy on the issue of poverty and wealth and responsibility.

As much as anywhere else, if not more so, we need to be humble, which means we need to know what we don't know. That's humility. We need to clasp our judgment mechanisms, which tend to file people and issues in certain categories. We're locked in our judgments, some of us, and it keeps us from learning what we need to learn in order to live justly and to show mercy. And maybe that some folks here already have had their judgment mechanism, their own addiction to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that's what judgment is all about, and maybe you've already had that trigger, and you've already made judgments that are going to try to block you from hearing the rest of this message. Judgments like, oh, here we go again, he's minimizing homosexuality or here we go again, more of this liberal stuff and we're going to be beating up on the wealthy or what have you. And, see, if you have those kinds of judgments, it will keep you from receiving the word fully and keep you locked into whatever you're locked into. If we're ever going to live justly and learn how to love mercy, we've got to start with humility, knowing what we don't know.

Now, there's two kinds of judgments I want to talk about here, and they're both very important. There's the judgment of the affluent towards the poor. And, by the affluent, I mean those, I will just say, that have their needs met. You don't live worried about meeting your basic needs. And the poor are those who don't have the resources to meet their basic needs. So there's a judgment that some who are affluent have towards the poor, and there's also a judgment that the poor can have to the affluent or those who are in solidarity to the poor can have to the affluent. So I want to talk about both of those sorts of judgments.

First, let's talk about judgments towards the poor. Sometimes you hear or maybe you don't say it but you think it or some people are thinking it, things like this: You know those poor folks, if they would just, in this land of equal opportunity, if they would just work hard, if they would just be less lazy, they wouldn't be poor. I work hard. That's how come I'm not poor. So, if they would just work harder, they wouldn't be so poor. Or, you know, if they would just take care of their property more instead of trashing their apartments, well, then that would help them get out of poverty. If they would just stop doing drugs or get off of alcoholism, that would help them get out of poverty. If they wouldn't commit so many crimes and have so many folks in prison, well, that would really help their poverty. There's a lot of evidence that shows that there's a correlation there. And, if they would stop having kids out of wedlock, that would really help them get out of poverty, because there's a lot of studies that show kids being born out of wedlock contributes significantly to the poverty rates. And, if they just managed their money better and didn't eat out at fast-food restaurants all the time and were better stewards of the resources that they have, they could get out of their poverty. If they would just prioritize better.

How come so many poor folks have got large, flat T.V. screens and have cable television and great stereo systems and drive in cars that a lot of middle-class folks don't even have, you know, so that's why they're poor. So the judgment goes. We think we know. We think we know. And what's really convenient about that kind of process of judging, thinking we know, is that, if that's true, then I'm off the hook on this one. If that's all true, then it's just their fault. If that's true, then I don't have to, really, worry too much about how I live and how I steward my resources because it's their own fault. It's a very convenient judgment to have. Or what can happen is that folks who have that judgment but still have, kind of, a compassionate heart, what happens to them is they become the fixers of the poor. Since I know white folks are poor and I've got resources, I, the righteous and wealthy, will help them live out the American dream a little bit better. And so we dance into their poverty zone, and we show up with the money, and we show up with all of the know how and whatever, and we're going to fix them. That's what this is about. We're going to fix this problem. And the heart is in the right place but, see, because it's lacking humility, it never works. It comes across as extremely patronizing. Folks will certainly, probably, take your money, but you're not going to do anything to really alleviate the situation long term because you go in thinking you know what you don't know. If we're going to live justly and live with compassion in any way that makes a difference, I'm talking to the affluent here, it has to start with humility and saying we don't know. We don't know. And that means we need to learn.

That's why a core of this whole series is going to be about, this whole conference we're putting on at the end of October, will be about learning to be in relationships with people who are from a different socioeconomic strata than you are, and to get on the inside, get on the inside of their experience and begin to see how things, you know, maybe work in their life that contribute to poverty and develop compassion out of these relationships. But it has to start with humility. That movie that we promo'd that's no longer available, that's one way that a lot of people have found helps them begin to get a bigger picture of get out of our judgments and begin to get a more realistic perspective of what keeps people stuck in a cycle of poverty.

Now, it is undoubtedly true, undoubtedly true that having kids out of wedlock, for example, contributes to poverty, for sure. And doing drugs contributes to poverty; yeah. And the crime rate contributes to poverty; absolutely. There's a lot of truth in that. But, see, those are generalizations and stereotypes. They don't explain anything. There's some principles there that are true, but it doesn't explain anything. Even in cases, individual cases where it may be applied: This particular person is lazy, this particular person had a child out of wedlock and that's why they're poor, even when it applies individually, it doesn't explain anything.

Without taking away personal responsibility at all, think about this, how many people do you know who have all the opportunities in the world in front of them, because this is the land of

equal opportunity, right, and so they look at all these opportunities, and they wake up one morning and say, gee, you know what, I think I'm just going to flush those all down the toilet and I'm going to go out and get me some drugs and have a couple kids out of wedlock and I'm going to commit some crime and get thrown into prison. Why? Because I want to be poor. It doesn't work like that. It doesn't work like that. Which means that maybe we need to look at the bigger picture and ask the question: What is it that contributes to those sorts of decisions? Without alleviating personal responsibility at all, we have to look at the possibility that there are things in the system, things in the system that, perhaps, advantage some folks and disadvantage others. Perhaps there are some things in the systems, systemic aspects of society fueled by principalities and powers that privilege some and disadvantage others. Maybe the cards are stacked a little more in the favor of some and stacked against others. Now, it may be that here, all of a sudden, some folks had a little trigger go off, a judgment came in, and they said here we go again, talking about privileges, all that liberal mambo pambo, some people are privileged, some people are disadvantaged, this is the land of equal opportunity, and now we're going to go off on this liberal thing and we're going to blame the system. Consider the possibility, if you just had that thought, whether you're here or on podcast, that the reason you thought that was, perhaps, because you yourself are privileged, and it's one of the privileges of the privileged that you don't have to know that you're privileged. Understand. Understand. You know, one of the privileges of the privileged is that you get to call your privilege normal. This is the ordinary. This is the normal, and you assume that everyone has that because you don't bump into the same kind of walls that those who don't have that privilege bump into. And the only way you're going to learn about those walls and those other things that you're oblivious to is by humbly learning from others who don't have that privilege. But it's invisible if you have the privilege. It's why it took me over three decades to really wake up to the reality that, as an affluent, white male, I had some things stacked in my favor from the start. I didn't know that. But I did. And I thought everybody had the same thing. But they don't. And, see, if we're going to get out of our judgments and begin to act justly and begin to wake up to the systemic things and move with compassion rather than judgment, we need to start by being humble, learning and listening, walk humbly with your God.

So, throughout this whole series, we're going to be stressing the importance of dialogue and the importance of listening and the importance of relationship building. And, instead of trying to fix the poor, we're going to be emphasizing being with the poor and walk with the awareness that we can't hope to serve the poor, talking to the affluent here, until we first learn how to learn from the poor. We want to be empowering folks that are or have been in poverty to be the educators of the rest of us and let us in on a world that, maybe, we would otherwise not be aware of, like the song we sang earlier pointed to, with the Doobie Brothers, you know I'm your brother, yet our worlds are very, very different. We need to have our lives enriched by the poor and educated by the poor before we can ever learn how to effectively serve the poor.

So those are the judgments that the affluent can have towards the poor. And, to go forward, we need to collapse those and just humbly learn and listen. But there's also a judgment that can go the other way. A judgment on the part of the poor towards the affluent or a judgment on the part of those who really get it and are in solidarity with the poor against the affluent. This is, actually, one of the oldest judgments in the book. This is as old as humanity itself. It's called class envy. And, in class envy, what happens is you look at those folks who have got a bigger slice of the pie than you have and you resent it, and you say to yourself, to those in your class, if they would just give up some of their overly-sized slice of the pie and give it to us, the world would be a fair place. We want what they have. Class envy. And we find this going on throughout history. In fact, some political systems are there to sort of force those who have a bigger slice of the pie to share it with some of those that have a smaller slice of the pie. Marxism being the classic case of this where you sort of impose a standard of fairness on the pie. So we're all going to share it. And I don't care what your politics about that may be, but that motive of resentment and envy has no place in the kingdom. The way the judgments sometimes look in Christian circles is something like this. And, in my experience, the ones who tend to have this the most are those who have sacrificed a lot to be in solidarity with the poor, which is really praise worthy, but then they can turn around and judge others who haven't followed that pattern. So you hear words like this, and I've heard words like this, maybe you have, too. You can't call yourself a Christian and live in a house worth "X" amount of dollars. You're a hypocrite. Or no one who drives a Lexus can say they're a Christian or no one who wears those nice, expensive clothes can say they're a Christian, no one that eats that kind of food can call themselves a Christian, no one who really is a Christian can shop anywhere other than a thrift store. If you go to Saks Fifth Avenue or one of these other expensive stores, well, there's no way you can call yourself a Christian. It's about judgment, a judgment towards those who are affluent. I myself have been the recipient of some of these, at times, and they're not fun. Here's one example. About 15 years ago, my wife and I were living out in the suburbs, and we moved out of our starter home to a little bit bigger home and it was a really nice house, had some nice property, and we were enjoying it, and I mentioned it from the pulpit one time. Somebody took the trouble to go find out where we lived and look our house over, which is kind of scary, our own little private house inspector, and then this person confronted me after a service, and I didn't know who this person was. They had just been attending the church for a little while. But it was one of these people who had given up a lot to enter into the solidarity of the poor, and just said I can't believe that you live in that house. How dare you call on us to live compassionately towards the poor and with generosity when you live in a house, that house has got to be worth a half a million dollars. How dare you stand up at the pulpit and a representative of the gospel and live in that kind of house. Now, I responded by saying this, and I was gentle, you know, I was loving, kind. I always am. I'm so righteous. But I just said – and modest. But I said – I'd forgotten this is a sermon about humility. Scratch that one. But here's

the thing. I said, well, first of all, you've really overestimated the cost of our house. We got an incredible deal, but thanks for the compliment, I mean, it is a really nice a house. Secondly, what do you know about me or about my family or about our finances or where our money goes? Do you know anything? No, you don't. So it's a little bit odd to have you pontificating like this. The third thing is, I don't recall inviting you to have an opinion about this. Did I solicit your opinion about this? Did I invite you in on my life? I haven't. But the fourth thing, and it's really an important thing. I was being a little sarcastic, and I was smiling and good hearted about this, but I, basically, said are you sure you want to throw stones on this thing? Because, I'm wondering, how much does your house cost? And so he kind of proudly said, well, I used to live in your kind of house but I sacrificed it and now the house I live in in the inner city is worth a hundred thousand dollars, a real cheap house. I go, a hundred thousand dollars. How big is it? And he goes, well, a small house. It's 1500 square feet. I go, 1500 square feet. Okay. How many people live in that house? And he said, well, my wife and myself and my daughter. I go, three people in a 1500-square-foot house that cost a hundred thousand dollars. You sure you want to throw stones at me here? Because, I'm betting, it's even got internal plumbing, doesn't it, huh, probably even heating. And, if it does, that puts you in the top 10 percent in the world, in the world. And so what you're doing with me right now, someone that's 90 percent below you could be doing towards you. So do we really want to play this game? Can we just call off the judgment pit bulls and say that unless someone has invited you in on their life, there's really no point in trying to probe in there and judge them.

You see, we're always self selective in our judgments. We always bend the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to our own favor, and so we can look to the people that have more than we have and out of our class resentment we judge them. Those nasty rich people, those nasty big houses, those nasty cars, and yada, yada, yada. But, unless you're at the bottom of the pecking order globally, there's going to be someone beneath you doing the exact same thing to you. And all of it is driven by idolatry to feel kind of righteous in our victimization because we don't have what they have. This isn't the motive of the kingdom. This isn't the way to move forward here.

Now, here's the thing. It is really true that we all need people in our lives who are able to speak into them. It is true that if we're going to learn to live justly and to live with compassion, we need people, a missional community, a community on a mission in our life, and we've given them the right to, if necessary, call us on the carpet with our spending, and they don't do it because they want to judge us, and they don't do it to feel self righteous, but we do it because we've all agreed that here's how we want to live. We want to be learning how to live more justly and show more compassion towards the poor, so can we help one another? And that is totally appropriate. In fact, it is absolutely necessary. I'm convinced you cannot significantly swim upstream in this consumeristic, materialistic culture if you're going solo. You might for a

little while, but the suction and the pull of the powers in the whole consumeristic culture eventually wear us down. We need people around us who can hold us accountable when they see that we're going off track. But, if a person hasn't invited you in on their life, if you're not in a covenant relationship with them, if they haven't solicited your opinion, you have no business going there, whether they're rich or whether they're poor. Know what you don't know. Stay humble. Don't go looking for a speck in their eye because you have a two by four in your own eye. Your one responsibility towards them would be to bless them and love them and remember that Jesus died for them and they have unsurpassible worth, and that's the end of it right there. Amen. Amen.

So here's the thing. In this series, we're not going to be about trying to think we understand all of the things about poverty, judging the poor or trying to fix the poor, but we're also not going to be trying to stick it to the rich. Rather, this whole series is about us as a people saying how can we learn from one another, how can we grow together, how can we humbly set aside what we think we, maybe, already know and humbly learn from one another and grow forward in this? We want to live in the question: What does Micah 6 look like here and now for us? Or those who are listening through podcast, what does it look like in your environment? What does acting justly, living with mercy, loving mercy, and acting humbly look like in your particular culture? And we want to be doing this so that we can all wake up to the ways that the system of the culture and the powers behind the system have co-opted us. Maybe we've sold out, waking up to ways that we don't act justly, maybe we don't show mercy, maybe we don't act humbly. It's not about judging the rich or the poor. It's about staying humble and learning from one another. That's why throughout this whole thing we'll be talking about relationships and talking about listening and dialogue and learning. But, to get there, we have to collapse the judgment mechanism.

I want to end this way. Would you just close your eyes for a moment, and I want to ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to us areas in our life where, maybe, we have been in judgment thinking we know. If you're affluent, have you had judgments about the poor that, maybe, has conveniently kept you from feeling the need of doing something about it. If you tend to be more on the poor side of things, have you had judgments against the wealthy, maybe resentments? Will you submit those to the Lord right now, realizing that you are a sinner saved by grace? You're called to act justly. You are called to show compassion. You are called to be humble. You are not called to police others on how they are acting justly, how they are showing mercy, or how humble they are. So just release it. Can you let it go? Can you let it go?

Holy Spirit, help us to be a people who know what we don't know; and, therefore, people who humbly listen and learn and grow. And, God, stir up in our hearts a desire to confront in our own lives the sin of Sodom, free us from the stranglehold of that to live out your just and

compassionate kingdom. In Jesus' name we pray, and all God's people said, one last time – God bless you guys. Go out and live justly. The alter is open if you want to come forward for prayer.