

When I was in high school, I spent a night outside over Christmas break with several of my friends. It was for some organization (I can't remember which one), and we were raising awareness of homelessness. People were supposed to donate money or food. We all bundled up in our best winter gear, had sleeping bags, and we made pallets out of cardboard boxes to sleep on. I think we made smores, somehow.

I worked for QuikTrip at the time, so I showed up with about fifty boxes after my shift at work. I used probably seven rolls of duct tape to construct a fairly impressive cardboard dwelling. We made it on the news, and I got to be interviewed about my brown and silver street palace.

Needless to say, I think I missed the point of the exercise. Looking back on that kid, I don't recall a particular new perspective on homelessness. I don't recall, in fact, being excited about anything except for the fact that I made it on TV.

You may, if you're inclined to be kind, chalk that up to adolescent self-centeredness. But looking back, I see something else at play - or rather, something that was missing. I grew up in church, which means that by the time I was camping, I had spent roughly 17 years hearing about God's love for the world and what it meant to be a part of God's people. But somehow, in all that time, I had never learned to wonder what God might think about homelessness.

I grew up in a church where what God really cared about was my behavior. Obey my parents, don't drink or have sex, and try to be nice to people. The Church had no real obligation to other people beyond niceness, and we didn't ask how the Church should be involved in big social problems like education, poverty, immigration or other issues.

[**Personal holiness vs. social justice**] This is a common problem in churches - that we divorce so-called social justice from a concern for character and personal holiness. But it's a problem because we have the wrong picture of God. Imagining that God is only concerned with behavior is actually a pagan view of God. If we understand who God is, the full story of God's love for us as creator and our role in God's creation, then we see that there is no separation between our call as people and our call into the world. The dichotomy we make is a false one, one that has no place in the story of God.

In the Church calendar, this is the season of Epiphany - the season that follows Christmas. Epiphany is all about who God is. Epiphany reminds us of the whole story of God: that God created the world and is not distant and removed, but near, with us, and working to reclaim the world.

This year, our series is called the Prophets & Poets Mixtape. We're learning who God is by listening to the prophets and songs God's people have celebrated for thousands of years. Like the mixtapes you used to make as a lovestruck teen, these songs and sages reveal the character of God and help us see God in new, surprising ways. They're correcting some toxic beliefs we have about God.

Today, we're tackling the belief we have that God is distant and unconcerned with the world. A lot of us think God created the world, then retreated to far-off Heaven where he sits and watches us, judging. The goal of life is to get to Heaven when we die, so we end up with a spirituality that basically says, try really hard to be good enough - or maybe 'Don't worry just have faith in Jesus and he'll be good enough for you.'

This is pagan - it's essentially no different from the Greeks worshipping Zeus, removed to Mt. Olympus, watching with lightning bolt in hand. God is removed, we work hard to keep God happy, and if we do it well enough, we get a reward in the afterlife, which is far from Earth.

Both the prophet and the song we're reading today center on the question of right worship. What does God want from us? How do we be God's people? But these questions are built on an assumption that God is near to us, and that God is at work. So let's begin this morning with Psalm 15.

[**Scripture Slide 1**] This Psalm is a Psalm of ascent - it's one the people would sing as they went to the Temple for worship, or as they began their worship in a synagogue. It was written to be sung back and forth across the aisle (which in their day would've been men vs women). So I want to read it as they would have read it, sort of as a responsive reading (don't worry I won't make you sing since we don't know the tune!). If reading out loud makes you feel uncomfortable, don't feel obligated to do it.

Leader: Who may worship in your sanctuary, Lord? Who may enter your presence on your holy hill?

Right: Those who lead blameless lives and do what is right, speaking the truth from sincere hearts.

Left: Those who refuse to gossip or harm their neighbors or speak evil of their friends.

Right: Those who despise flagrant sinners, and honor the faithful followers of the Lord, and keep their promises even when it hurts.

Left: Those who lend money without charging interest, and who cannot be bribed to lie about the innocent.

Leader: Such people will stand firm forever. -- Psalm 15:1-5

It's clear from the Psalm that those who come to the temple are to be personally holy - they live blameless lives, speak truth, refuse gossip, keep promises even when it hurts.

But they also have a concern for social equality - they don't lend money at interest and refuse bribes. These were social justice issues in Ancient Israel.

The song is about the character of God's people. If you're a bit familiar with ancient Temples, this song might strike you as a little off. The song says that only people who are holy and blameless can come to the Temple. But isn't the whole point of going to the Temple to offer sacrifices for

sin? Don't the Temple sacrifices make God happy and in turn make us the kind of people God is happy with?

Or, to put it in today's terms, isn't what God wants going to Church? Isn't that what makes God happy with us?

Well no, not according to the prophets. And getting it wrong is enough to get us sued... by God. Turn with me to Micah 6.

[Scripture Slide 2] Micah is speaking during what we would term a 'religious revival'. People are flocking back to the Temple, money is pouring into the Temple treasury, and as far as most people cared, everything was great!

But God was not happy with a full Temple and a full treasury. God spoke through the prophet Micah, putting the people on trial. As we walk through this courtroom transcript together, let's listen to God's charges: that despite all their religiosity, Israel is not keeping their end of the covenant!

The prophet begins by setting the stage:

Listen to what the Lord is saying:

“Stand up and state your case against me. Let the mountains and hills be called to witness your complaints. And now, O mountains, listen to the Lord's complaint! He has a case against his people. He will bring charges against Israel.

God calls creation itself to witness the trial (to ensure it's fair).

“O my people, what have I done to you? What have I done to make you tired of me? Answer me!

For I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to help you.

Don't you remember, my people, how King Balak of Moab tried to have you cursed and how Balaam son of Beor blessed you instead? And remember your journey from Acacia Grove to Gilgal, when I, the Lord, did everything I could to teach you about my faithfulness.”

God states his case: he's held up his end of the bargain. God led Israel out of Egypt and protected them from foreign powers. Again and again, God did everything to demonstrate his care and love for Israel, to uphold the agreement they made between each other.

Now the people respond (Micah the prophet speaks for them.)

What can we bring to the Lord? Should we bring him burnt offerings? Should we bow before God Most High with offerings of yearling calves? Should we offer him thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for our sins?

The people throw up their hands and say, "What more do you want God? More sacrifices? A thousand rams? 10k rivers of oil? In case it's not clear, these are wildly exaggerated numbers. The people are essentially saying, How much harder can we possibly work?

And then they take it one step further: Should we sacrifice our firstborns? That sounds like an insane question to us. But for a person in that world, it wasn't out of bounds... the pagan gods of the Ancient Near East welcomed child sacrifice. We have stories in the Scriptures of pagan kings sacrificing their firstborn children to win victories in battle.

So the people's question made sense in their world. But it also revealed they had a horrible picture of God. God tells them, "I am not happy with you. You haven't been keeping up your end of the covenant."

SO the people think, "God is unhappy. We need to do more sacrifices. How much more do you want, God? A thousand rams? Oceans of oil? Our firstborns?!"

Their response reveals they think God is like the pagan gods around them. They think God sits up in Heaven, demanding unswerving obedience or else. They think God demands sacrifices, rituals of obedience.

This view of God is inherently pagan. It's wrong. And it always ends in pain for us.

Which is why God responds to their confusion:

No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. -- Micah 6:1-8

[Justice] To do what is right is to enact justice - the wording the prophet uses here isn't only about personal behavior. Justice is about the whole society. God's people are to be a people who see justice, righteousness, what is right for everyone, at every level of society.

[Personal holiness] To walk humbly is about personal holiness. We are to live as God's creations, God's children, in God's world. To walk humbly with God is to recognize that the world is not ours, that we have been entrusted with creation by God and are called to live as God's images in the world.

[Tied together by covenant] On one side of the command is a call to "love mercy". This is a Hebrew word that doesn't have a good English translation - you'll see it rendered a number of ways in various English translations. The closest we can get is "covenantal faithfulness". It's a word that means 'giving your all to honor the covenant you made'. It's what God demonstrated at

the beginning of the lawsuit, when God recounted all he had done to hold up his end of the covenant. Essentially, God is saying here, "I want you to be faithful as I am faithful."

We want to pit holiness and justice against each other, imagine that you have to choose one or the other. But here God reminds us that it has never been the case. In giving this command, God is reminding us of our story, the story that has been the story of God's people from the beginning.

God created us in God's image and placed us in the world with a holy vocation: to rule as God's image-bearers. To be in the world as God is in the world.

After God freed Israel from slavery, God reaffirmed this vocation in the covenant: God called Israel to be a kingdom of priests, representing God to the world.

The Church shares in Israel's vocation today. We are the body of Christ, God's visible presence in the world. We are to be in the world as God is in the world. We are to love the world as God loves the world. To work for peace and flourishing as God does.

There is no such thing as personal holiness without concern for social justice. And no lasting peace and flourishing will be attained that does not flow out of a life with God. These are two sides of the same coin (which is why, when Jesus was asked to sum up the whole covenant in one law, he said, "Love God and love people.")

When we pit personal holiness against social justice, or try to do one without the other, we end up creating discord. The story we tell the world doesn't sound good. It looks either like self-righteousness or bleeding-heart social crusading. Only when we seek justice, walk humbly and do it all out of a deep relationship with God do we sing a song the world wants and needs to hear.

[Pic] My friend Guy recently took a job for an organization called ACT - it stands for Advocates for Community Transformation. They're a Christian organization that refuses to see a divide between personal holiness and social justice. They work with individuals in crime-filled communities in Dallas to reduce crime and make the neighborhood safer. They pray in the communities - often taking prayer walks with the citizens who live there. They also work with legal advocates to drive drug houses out of the neighborhoods and work to create sustainable, long-term good. Guy told me their goal is to get out of a neighborhood in 2 years and never have to go back.

[Cord Image] ACT doesn't see a difference between personal holiness and the good of the community. For them, they're two sides of the same coin - justice and humility, bound by the cord of covenant.

Nothing could be further from that ignorant, disconnected kid I was in high school. Friends, a Church that is unconcerned with the world around us is not Christ's body because Jesus loves the world. A Church that pays no mind to looking like God is no Church because we are called to be God's image in the world.

God is not distant and removed. God is in the world and God loves the world. To be God's people means to be in the world and to love the world. To be as God in the world. We have a special, sacred calling: to reveal God to the world, to be God's image in the world.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Though we have all failed in this calling, God refused to leave us in our failure. In the person of Jesus, he showed us what complete faithfulness looks like, even when that faithfulness took him to the cross. So today, when we consider what it looks like to be God's people, we come to the Communion Table.

At this table, Jesus broke bread as his body, broken for us. He gave us wine as his blood, spilled for a new covenant between us and God. And so today we approach as a people who crave wholeness - in our own spirits, in our world. We approach as a people tired of the false divide between working for justice and pursuing a holy life. And we find healing and wholeness in the broken body of Jesus.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to participate today. If you're craving wholeness, then you're welcome to find it at Jesus' table with us.

1. When in the last week have I demonstrated a concern with both justice and personal holiness?
2. When in the last week have I ignored either justice or holiness?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to ignore either justice or holiness?
4. How can I pursue faithfulness to God in both areas this week?

Spiritual Practice + Blessing

A sacred reading of Psalm 15