

Welcome

Does anyone know what the longest running TV show is? Probably you do - it's *Law & Order*. The show has run 22 seasons and has over 400 episodes. It has multiple spin-offs, including SVU, which has over 500 episodes. All together, the *Law & Order* franchise boasts well over 1,000 episodes of TV. In fact, because it's in syndication, there is literally an episode on every hour of every day on some channel somewhere.

We *love* courtroom drama. From Perry Mason to Matlock to Law & Order, we love watching justice served.

I bring up courtroom dramas because the text we're going to be in is an ancient courtroom drama. The prophet Micah presents his criticism of God's people as a court case, where God is the plaintiff, bringing a case against God's people (so maybe it's more like Judge Judy than SVU).

Listen to how Micah sets up our scene today:

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." -- Micah 6:1-2 (NLT)

God opens with a pretty baller move: he dares the people to counter-sue. Go ahead... state a case against me. We'll let the very created world judge between us.

But then God goes on to finish God's opening remarks. And I just want you, here at the top of our worship, to imagine what comes next.

If you heard God was taking you to court, what's the vibe you imagine? Is God angry with you? Isn't this the *exact* scenario we're afraid of - God judging us? Judging - like a judge. In a courtroom. Like... this is the literal embodiment of what everyone's afraid of.

So let me spoil it for you: What we find when God takes us to court is not a judgmental, wrathful deity who's about to toss us in prison and throw away the key.

What we find is a God who is grieving, who knows we've deeply missed who God really is, and is inviting us back to faith.

So could we begin in worship this morning, singing in faith that God really is better than *Law & Order* (and all the angry, judgmental images of God we have).

Message

We're in the season of Epiphany, a season when we ask what it means that Jesus is for the whole world. We are Jesus' church, but Jesus isn't just for us. He's for the whole world. So what's our role in Jesus' mission?

This year, our series is called Spark! We're exploring the ways Jesus ignites our calling. What does it take to be the Church Jesus calls us to be?

It might seem counterintuitive, but to answer those questions, we're going to be spending time with the prophets of the Hebrew Bible for this series. Men who lived out God's calling among God's people.

Because the God who created and cared for this special people thousands of years ago is the same God who arrived in the person of Jesus that first Christmas, and is the same God who gathered us for worship today!

We met Isaiah's Servant, that ideal human who perfectly embodies God's call on us. We saw that God calls us to be faithful, not effective. And we saw how the Servant stands with the marginalized because that's where God is.

For the next couple of weeks, we're going to be looking at what constitutes authentic religion. So let me ask you - when I say, "religion," what comes to your mind? Probably this - singing songs, listening to a sermon. Maybe private disciplines like prayer or reading your bible. It's common for us to think of religion as primarily a vertical reality - something between us and God.

In fact, over the last decade or so, there's been a pretty fierce debate in Evangelical Christian circles about whether or not Christians should bother with issues like poverty, race, immigration and more. Critics say those are 'earthly' issues that distract from what really matters, which is our relationship with God. 'Social justice', as they call it, is a danger to the true gospel.

If you've been around Catalyst very long, you know we reject that sort of binary thinking. For us, there's no difference between the social gospel and the true gospel. God's justice is social by nature, and Jesus' good news (which is what the word 'gospel' means) is social - it's about the health and justice of everyone.

So today, we're looking at where we get such a ludicrous idea.

Turn with us to [Micah 6](#).

[Timeline 1] Micah served as a prophet during the end of the 8th century BCE, which was marked by massive social upheaval. After a long period of peace, the expanding Assyrian Empire conquered and destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel, resulting in a refugee crisis in the Southern Kingdom, Judah.

So Micah's people are experiencing economic insecurity, a flood of refugees, political instability and a general desire to get back to the good ole days of peace and tranquility.

And maybe the most surprising part is that they're flooding into church (if you remember what it was like after 9/11, sort of that). The Temple is full to bursting. People are showing up every Sabbath to make offerings, sing and pray together.

So... things are good, right?

Wrong. Remember: Micah crafts this as a courtroom scene where God is bringing charges against God's people. What is the problem? Let's listen:

“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.” -- Micah 6:3–5 (NLT)

God claims the people *aren't* being faithful. That they have forgotten the God who liberated them from slavery, delivered them to the promised land and has kept them since.

Now, you're probably thinking, “Wait a minute... didn't you *just* say that Temple attendance is at an all time high?”

Yes, yes I did. And if you're feeling some shock, well that's to be expected. Because so did the people. Micah imagines their response, and it's deeply sarcastic.

I want you to imagine - they're going to Temple all the time. They're filling the treasury with tithes, offering all the right sacrifices. They're doing religion to a T.

So listen to their response:

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? -- Micah 6:6–7 (NLT)

Now, what's really fascinating here is the escalation. Because even in their sarcastic response, the people reveal the real problem.

First they're basically pointing out that they're doing everything right - all the correct sacrifices, just like God said.

Then they say, "Okay, so that's not good enough... would you be happy if we did thousands of rams and ten thousand rivers of olive oil?" That's clear exaggeration - those numbers aren't even possible.

Which makes the next one even more interesting: the people say, "What if we go all the way and sacrifice our firstborns?"

Now, that sounds monstrous to us. It wasn't great for them either. BUT child sacrifice was actually a legitimate form of worship practiced by the nations surrounding Judah. We have examples in the Bible of other kings and nations sacrificing their children.

So here's what the people's sarcasm reveals: deep down, they are treating Yahweh just like all the other gods around them.

They think of God primarily as a god of quid-pro-quo. You offer sacrifices, I keep you happy. If I'm not happy, you must not be sacrificing enough (up to the thing that is most valuable - your own firstborn).

The people think they're being clever by complaining that they're doing everything right. But in their complaint, they reveal they've completely missed who God is, and what it really means to worship.

Song

The people fundamentally misunderstand who God is, that worship is not about buying God's approval. So... what *is* worship about then? If God doesn't want more sacrifices, what *does* God want?

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 6:8 (NLT)

Now, each of those three terms is loaded with meaning. The first, 'to do what is right' - the Hebrew there is usually translated as 'to do justice'. But that same root word is the word we *also* translate as 'righteousness', which is a fancy religious word we think of as relating to our vertical relationship.

But hear this: in Hebrew there's no difference between a healthy relationship with God (righteousness) and a healthy social reality (justice). We use the same word to describe both. So in English, we can say, "What's more important, righteousness or justice?"

But in Hebrew, you'd be saying, "What's more important: righteous justice or righteous justice?" They're the same thing.

Love Mercy - this word 'mercy' is that Hebrew word *chesed*, the one that doesn't have a good English translation. It means 'faithful to the covenant,' and it conveys the idea of honoring God's way.

That way that's summed up by the 10 Commandments - you know... 4 about God (no idols, no name in vain, sabbath, etc) and 6 about our social reality (no murder, theft, lying under oath, etc).

Again, if you asked which of the 10 commandments God thinks we should keep - the ones about God or the ones about our neighbors, an Israelite would look at you like you were speaking English. They're *all* important. They *all* matter. You don't get to pick and choose.

And finally, walk humbly with God. This is a call to recognize our place in God's good world. We are that people called to be that ideal Servant, the one who cares for the marginalized, who remains close to God. Humility is an action - we have to walk, following after God.

What is true religion? We can't stay shut up in our Temple and ignore the refugee crisis outside. We can't pine for days of stability while ignoring how God calls us to be servants of hope in tumultuous times.

Friends, the church today is not in too dissimilar a state from Micah's day. Plenty of people want to give lip service to God even while attending weekly services. But our Monday thru Saturday reality is formed more by the politics and anxieties of our world than by the God we worship on Sundays.

God says, Enough is enough. Remember who you are - my people I rescued from sin and death. My people to whom I have been faithful at every turn. Don't ignore me when you encounter me out and about in the world.

So friends, when we talk about religion, let's not think about rules and rituals. Instead, let's think of the marginalized in our culture. Because Jesus reminds us that he lives with them, among them. And if we're to be a church that follows Jesus, that's where we'll live too.

True religion that God loves is found in loving the margins, those who slip through the cracks of our world. May we be a church found in the cracks.

Communion + Examen

What is the state of my vertical relationship with God right now?

What is the state of my relationship with my neighbors right now?

Where do I live in relation to our culture's most vulnerable?

How is God calling me to live in solidarity with the marginalized?

Assignment + Blessing