

**Menlo Park Presbyterian Church**  
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Series: A.K.A.  
Micah 6:8

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**“Judge”**  
**John Ortberg**

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Well we're in this series where we're looking together at the idea that God wants to be known, that He doesn't want to be a stranger or a mystery. Over the last few weeks we've looked at how God is a redeemer, and how God is the creator. Everything that exists came into being through God. God is a Father the way that a parent loves a little child. That's God's heart toward us...wonderful images.

Today we're looking at another name, another image of God. God is a judge. Sometimes people aren't so sure this is good news. But it is really good news, and I hope by the time we go together through thinking about this, that will be clear for all of us. These words will be familiar to a lot of you that we would say growing up in school, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. And to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible..." Then see if you remember, "With liberty and justice for all." Justice for all. What an amazing concept.

We love justice, and that idea of having a society where everybody is able to live in justice is such a good thing. And not much makes us angrier than when we see injustice...people getting away with injustice. I talked to a friend this week in Chicago about a parent, a father, who is guilty of unbelievable abuse, neglect, deceit, with his child. And then ended up sitting in a court room making up stories of misbehavior by his child who is now grown up that were total fabrications just to get himself out of trouble, and he got away with it. And it made me so mad when I was sitting there. It's hard to describe.

You all have experienced this; somebody looks you right in the eye and cheats you on a business deal and then goes home and sleeps like a baby. The head of a company sexually harasses a vulnerable young employee, a young woman who has taken this as her first job and then when she tries to tell the truth he gets her fired and he gets away with it. This is injustice and it makes our blood boil. We want justice.

Even at a baseball game we want justice. At a baseball game, we hire people whose job it is to maintain justice. That's the umpire, and he's supposed to make sure there's fair play, and if it doesn't happen...if you go to Giants Stadium in Tim Lincecum throws four strikes right down the heart of the plate and some umpire calls them balls, things get ugly. There is a traditional chant that goes up from the stands. We don't just say, "Educate the umpire." We don't say, "Send the umpire back for remedial training." We say, "Kill the umpire." If he can't bring justice, take him out and put him down. We want justice.

This week the focus of the world is on Iran. And you all know this story. A young woman who was protesting or maybe even just observing protests about the justice of the election ended up being gunned down and bled to death in the streets. And her image now is passed via computers and cell phones and television screens and magazines all around the world. It's kind of a symbol. Where can you find justice? Is there any place where justice can be found?

Several thousand years ago a tiny, little nation called Israel said, "Yes, there is." Little Israel. Nothing remarkable about this nation...not known for its military prowess or its commerce or size. Important just because it gave to the world this idea that there is a God...there is one God, and He created all things. He's a great God, and He wants to be known personally. He's the redeemer. He works to bring good out of bad. He's the creator, the maker of everything that exists. The reason why we love this earth so much is because it's a really good thing because God made it. He's a Father. He has a heart of compassion toward His children.

Here they say one of the best things about God is He's just. He never blows a call. He never bungles a verdict. He never misses a trick, and they would praise Him for this all the time. This is in Psalm 7, "***God is a righteous judge.***" Or Psalm 9, "***God judges the world with righteousness. He judges the peoples with equity.***" Or in another Psalm, "***The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous all together.***" Very often we'll come back to this in the Bible. The two words that get paired up are *justice* or *judge* and *righteous*.

Now of course, everybody loves justice and there were other nations that had that passion. The Greeks built statues to justice that had blindfolds...to express the idea that justice ought to be impartial...shouldn't cater to the wealthy or the powerful. They would build statues where the figure of justice would be holding scales to show that justice ought to be fair, no cheating, no tipping the scales. But of course the Greek gods were not just. I mean Zeus was just as fickle as any human being.

For Israel, here's what was unique, justice is not simply a human quest or a human frustration, justice is rooted in God's character. They said, "They day is going to come when every human being will be accountable to God." And even on the scale business, the Lord abhors dishonest scales. Accurate weights are His delight. Justice is not first of all a human word, it is not first of all a human project; it is God's Word. God is passionate about justice and one day justice will prevail.

There's an old story about three umpires I like about their relationship with justice. The first umpire (they're all talking about their commitment to fairness) says, "I call them the way I see them." The second umpire says, "I call them the way they are." The third umpire says, "They ain't nothing 'til I call them." I like that story. I'm apparently the only one that does this far into the weekend. But the idea of it is that justice is rooted in the character of God. It's not some arbitrary made up thing.

Abraham says in the book of Genesis to God, "***Does not the judge of all the earth judge with justice?***" One day justice is going to come. One day every human being will stand accountable before God. No one gets away with anything in the eternal scheme of things. This led to a unique development in Israel, this led to a group of people who were known as prophets. The prophets took on injustice, not just with other nations; this was a quite unique development of any culture or country. The prophets took on injustice in their own people. And not just inside Israel, they took on kings. They took on the wealthy. They took on the powerful. The prophets did this because justice is God's Word.

Now in the Bible, the books that are written by the prophets tend to be read the least of any sections in the Bible because the prophets often strike people as kind of cranky guys. This is from the prophet Amos. Amos said, "***Hear this word, you cows of Bashan...you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy.***" He was not making a lot of friends with that kind of language. Or Isaiah said, "***For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken lies, and your tongue mutters wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity.***" The Lord looked and was

displeased there was no justice. He saw there was no one and He was appalled there was no one to intercede. God is appalled by injustice.

Another prophet Micah said, *"Should you not know justice, you who hate good and love evil; who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan."* Doesn't that sound a little over the top, honestly? This is not Dale Carnegie material. The prophets are filled with this stuff, and we don't like it. We like happy books. We like happy words.

So why should we read the prophets? Well for one thing, because they're actually in the Bible. They are in there. It would not be a good thing to get to heaven some day and have Obadiah walk up to you and ask, "How'd you like my book?" Say, "Well, I didn't read it. It was in a bad location, and just too whiney." More than that, there is a reason why God chose 17 books of the Bible to be Books of the Prophets. There is a reason why it's kind of a discipline that we need to submit ourselves to, to sit under their words.

See a lot of times if we're not the ones who have experienced a great deal of injustice, if we're the ones in any given society who tend to have a little bit more of the power, a little bit more of the wealth, if life's going okay, we can read the Prophets and think, "What's the big deal? What are they getting all heated up about? I know there's violence in the world, and it is regrettable, but as long as it doesn't touch my life I'd prefer not to think about it, thank you very much. Certainly it's not connected to my hostility or lack of love. I know cheating goes on every day in the world of business. That's just the way thing are."

Eight thousand children and young people are born with or infected with HIV every day in Sub-Saharan Africa where it is now the leading cause of death. A few miles away from this room, children are born in poverty and they will grow up without access to decent education or decent housing through no fault of their own, but they're not *my* children. Maybe their parents did something so the family deserves it. That would kind of let me off the hook.

So what if in ancient Palestine the poor got the shaft? Where is it any different? Why go off the deep end? Somebody shades the truth a little for profit. Somebody ignores the poor. Somebody gets all wrapped up in their own comfort and affluence, and careless about remembering those in need and the prophets act like the world is falling apart. Because see...the Lord is appalled.

Jesus, who the Bible says was also a prophet, Jesus said every time somebody is in prison and doesn't get visited or hungry and doesn't get fed or naked and doesn't get clothed, somehow...somehow He suffers. He dies a little inside. The big deal is God loves justice. It's God's Word, and to the prophet has been given this crushing burden of looking at our world and seeing what a perfect God would see because the truth is I'd really rather not know. I'd really rather not hear.

There is a great scholar by the name of Abraham Heschel, and this is what he says. He was a student of the prophets, and God's passion for justice. This is what he says. Listen to this quote, "The shallowness of our moral comprehension, the incapacity to sense the depth of misery caused by our own failures is a simple fact of fallen humanity which no explanation can cover up." Events that horrify and appall God are everyday occurrences in our world, but I don't want to know. I don't want to see. I just as soon nobody tell me about it because it might disturb my comfort. I just...we just get used to it. We just get used to it.

It's amazing how we can do this. I told you a few weeks ago our family had a problem on a Saturday night after a church service. A skunk somehow very near our house did what skunks do, and we had to clear out

the house and call the gas company and the fire department, and it was awful. We finally went back inside, and I made a few other phone calls, but nothing actually happened. The smell just kind of faded gradually over the days, and the oddest thing was we just kind of got used to it. It didn't smell great, but we could tolerate it. Every once in a while somebody would come over to our house to visit us and they would say, "It doesn't smell good in here." We'd say, "Yeah, you're right. That's really...we ought to do something about that." But we just got used to it.

Then, the skunk went off a second time. I was on the road. I did not earn a lot of points with my family for this, and I finally tracked down the skunk whisperer who came to our house and found in the crawl space under our house were two live and one dead skunks that had just taken up residence. Now we have exorcised them from our presence, but we just got used to it. Just skunks in the house...we just got used to it.

After a while our capacity to just get used to evil...the prophets never got used to it. Prophets really do speak for God. They see what God sees. They speak what God feels, and if they sound over the top to us the problem isn't them. I just get used to it...a world that is so far off. God loves justice.

Now, how am I supposed to respond to this? Should I just walk around feeling guilty all the time? Should I be so overwhelmed because justice is so vast? Knowing the right thing to do is so complex, so difficult. Should I just be paralyzed by the immensity of the problem? No, the prophet Micah sums up the response God is looking for in one of the great statements that has ever been uttered by a human being in the book that Micah wrote. I want to set up the context, and then we'll just walk through the response. It's really, really simple.

Micah puts up our problem, puts our problem like this, *"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?"* Now every thoughtful human being has to think about this. What does God want? In a world that's messed up, where I'm messed up, what's God looking for? He described it from the culture of his day. *"Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with a thousand rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for the sin of my transgression, the firstborn of my body for the sin of my soul?"* What does God really want?

You see this escalation in this passage. So again, all thoughtful people will think about this, is it beyond my reach? The verse says, "Does God want burnt offerings?" Anybody could bring a burnt offering. It could be a handful of grain. Anybody could afford that. But that's not what God wants. How about a calf? That would be a more expensive sacrifice. Only the wealthy could afford that. Maybe only the wealthy can give God what He's looking for. How about 1,000 rams? Only a king could do that. Maybe 10,000 rivers of oil. See now this is impossible. This cannot be done. Should I sacrifice my own child? In the ancient world there were people who did this. What does God want? Is it possible to know?

Then Micah says, *"He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you?"* Let's read these words together out loud, *"But to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly before your God."* If you carry nothing else away, we want to carry this one, so let's read those one more time and just think about them. *"But to do justice and to love kindness and to walk humbly before your God."* Just those three things, and as God helps us, as we ask Him to, everybody can do them. And you know what they are now. We can pretend not to know. We can act like we're confused and life is really complicated, but Micah says, *"He has shown you, O man, [O woman]."*

God has been quite clear on this. Do justice. Start in your own world. Ask God for the gift of integrity. Just speak the truth. I mentioned before in the Bible most often the word *justice* is paired up with the word *righteousness*, which doesn't mean to be self-righteous. It means to do right. In the Bible the biblical notion of justice is way more than just due process or impartiality. It is tied to the way God intends the world to run. Shalom...all things in harmony...and it means to live in that way, to do right by all people. So doing justice just starts in really small ways. Just speak truth.

Anybody here ever prevaricate, ever deceive, ever exaggerate, ever hype a little bit? Anybody? Let's do a mass confession. Just for the good of yourself. How many of you have deceived anybody at least once over the last year? Everybody who is not raising your hands right now, you're doing it right now. Okay. So justice and righteousness...it just starts really small. In my own relationships, in the people I work with, because there can be no justice...this is one of the great illusions of the ideologies of our day. Ultimately there can be no social justice without personal righteousness. There is no system, political, economic, that is going to bring justice that is filled with unrighteous people. We'll always find a way around it.

Of course I can't make myself just, but I can ask God, "Would You help me?" Then we have to look at the world around us and ask God, "Where do You want us to be agents of justice?" A good place to start is this, and I'd ask you to just get personal with this...where is it when you see injustice it makes your blood boil? Where is it that when you see the world not running according to Shalom, you feel a burden in your spirit? You say, "God, that has to change. Somebody has to do something." That very well be the beginnings of God calling you to be somebody. God looks at the injustice and He's appalled there's no one to intercede. You be one who intercedes. See when that happens a little bit of God's kingdom begins to be manifested on earth as God gives us the power to do that.

I was talking to a young man last week. I was in Michigan and he was telling me about how he was all fired up because (and I didn't know this) there are 100,000 sex-trafficking victims just in this country. Not other countries in the world, just in the US. Often starts essentially with a child, a young person 12 or 13 years old...poor, abandoned, run away. They begin selling their bodies because they have nothing else. We live in a society where that happens to the tune of 100,000 young people every year. This kid said, "I have to do something." So he was getting educated and going to work to try to make a difference in this area.

Maybe it's housing. We looked together at a map that contrasted the foreclosures right around where this building is with foreclosures in East Palo Alto, just a few miles away and it was just breath taking. One of our tenders was telling me in East Palo Alto, relatively under-resourced community, then I think one other one, there are 17 predatory lending agencies...sharks waiting to prey on vulnerable people. I think there was one credible financial institution. This guy was saying, "That can't be. Somebody has to do something." So a group of folks, a lot of them from our church, banded together to figure out, "God, how can we bring a different day, a little bit of Shalom to this community that needs it so much?"

Maybe it's education. There's a woman I know, heard a fabulous talk from her, who learned that by the time children are in 4th grade, children from low-income families or communities on average are already three years behind other children...4th grade. Fifty percent of them will not graduate from high school when they're 18. The ones who graduate from high school, on average, will function at an 8th grade level. Little children...somebody has to *do* something. She started an organization called Teach America, and now thousands and thousands of college graduates have given two years of their lives to help make a difference around education.

Maybe it's poverty. And there are folks in our church involved in Kiva, Opportunity International, and Millennium Project. We have the Ethiopia Initiative that we've been involved with...so many partners. In fact, this fall we're going to do an all-church, kind of all hands on deck, kind of a campaign. September and October, six or seven weeks, called the Ripple Effect. We're going to pull together what we learn here, what everybody is doing in small groups, what people are doing in ministries, just a targeted, aligned campaign to ask, "God how do you want our lives to be like ripples going out on a pond of compassion and justice and caring and blessing for the Bay area and beyond us?"

You'll hear more about that in the months to come, but we're just praying God will raise up people who will be willing to lead small groups and help our church just be filled with ripples on a pond of what it is God wants to do. Do justice. Love kindness. Kindness is such a simple thing. It's a word most associated with God, *hassed* is the word that gets used here for the love God has that always expresses itself in action. Notice people and do something.

A team of us were at a spiritual formation conference in San Antonio this week, and I was staying in a hotel. I was leaving my hotel room, and I had a thought. Any of you hear Kevin Kim's message last week? It was a remarkable story. And I thought about his mom. Kevin's mom would get up at 5:00 in the morning to take him to school and then come back and work in this hotel, cleaning toilets and washing sheets all day long, and then go back and pick him up and fix dinner and help the kids do their homework and then pray from midnight until 1:00 in the morning, sleep for four hours, and get up to do it the next day.

I was leaving my hotel room and there was a woman waiting to go in to clean it up. I had this thought, "That could be Kevin's mom." How often am I in a place like that, and somebody comes in to clean and I don't even see them? I don't even think about them. Just some nameless, faceless somebody whose job it is to go in there and clean it up. I thought, "How would I feel if that was my mom?" That's the heart of God. The Lord is appalled. I just walked back down the hallway to go back in that room to leave there what, if I was Kevin and that was my mom cleaning that room, I would hope somebody would leave.

You know what the Lord requires of you. You know. Do justice. Love kindness. You can do that all the time every day.

Then I love the third one. Walk humbly before your God. I think Micah puts this one last because it's hard work to be a prophet and not get all self-righteous about it. Isn't it? Anybody here ever seen anybody in a church who loves to go around correcting other people? There is a kind of person who loves to pass judgment in a spirit of arrogant superiority which they cover up by saying, "Of course I have the gift of being a prophet." There's a very important theological distinction between being a prophet and being a jerk.

Part of what Micah recognizes is when judgment comes, and it will come one day... You know, we get all worried about it, but nobody gets away with anything. One day God's judgment will be made clear, and nobody's getting away with anything. Every deed done in the darkness is going to come to light one day. Every lie and every act of thievery, of cheating, of violence, of aggression will all be made clear. Everybody will be accountable before God one day. This is what we are taught about our God. That's a really good thing, especially for people who have suffered injustice. That's a really good thing.

You know when Israel thought about God being a judge that wasn't like bad news to them, that was enormously hope-producing in them. Justice is coming. Here's the thing, what about when justice comes my way? Micah said, *"Nations will see sin and be ashamed. They will come trembling out of their dens and turn in fear to the Lord our God."* This will happen. *"Who is a God like you who pardons sin and forgives transgression? You will again have compassion on us and hurl our iniquities into the depth of the sea."* See this is our God.

He loves justice and I love justice. I want justice to come, but generally I want justice to get handed out to the bad guys. Who are the bad guys? Well not me...not me. Justice is going to come my way someday. What about my sin? Now we're almost to the time of worship, because see this is what you have to understand about God. He loves justice. He is a just God. A lot of what gets talked and written about spirituality in our day is rather vague and talks about it as if spirituality is kind of an asset to help you achieve your agenda and your dreams. Not much gets said about the fact that God is a just God, but He is. We wouldn't want a God who is anything other than just.

Now He has revealed Himself fully in Jesus. Jesus takes the sentence, the penalty that all of our sin merits on Himself on the cross. *"The wages of sin is death,"* the Bible says, and that death, that spiritual death that by every right, all of us, you and I should have died, Jesus dies in our place on the cross. So the cross becomes this miracle, this mystery where all of God's justice and all of God's mercy meet together in the suffering love of Jesus. Walk humbly before your God because He's a God of forgiveness.

I love this story. This actually happened in the Great Depression when Fiorello La Guardia was mayor of New York and it became kind of a famous event, but I always love it. Sometimes just for the fun of it he would preside over police court in New York. One bitterly cold day they brought a trembling old man before him, who had been charged with stealing a loaf of bread...just a loaf of bread. The man explained that his family was starving, and it was cold. This was the Depression. He had to do something.

La Guardia was touched, but he said, "I have to punish you. The law makes no exception. I have no choice. I sentence you to a fine of \$10." Of course, the man did not have \$10. So then La Guardia reached into his pocket and said, "Now, here's \$10 to pay your fine." And he threw the money into his hat, and then he said, "I now remit his fine." Then he said, "And now I charge everybody in this court room fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread to feed his family. Mr. Bailiff, collect the fines and give them to the defendant." Isn't that a fabulous story? A hat was passed and a trembling old man who was waiting to be taken to jail is given \$47.50. What a great God!

Our God is a God of justice. Our God is a judge. Our God is a God of mercy and a God of compassion who's Son Jesus went to the cross so we could be set free, so that justice might one day become a part of God's gift to our world. What a great God! What a *great* God!

Here's what we're going to do. We're going to close in worship, but first for a couple of minutes there's a video. This is a preacher who died at the age of 87 in 2000, who kind of went on a roll (African American Church). Got on a roll about what a great God God is. Some of you may have seen this before. His name is S.M. Lockridge. Do you know what the S.M. stands for? Shadrach Meshach Lockridge. Isn't that a great name? He just went on a riff about what a fabulous God God is. Then there was a question. Do you know Him? Do you know this God? So you watch this video. Let your mind revel in what a remarkable God our God is. Then we'll worship Him with the honor our God is due.

## **S. M. Lockridge video clip:**

The Bible says my King is the King of the Jews. He is a King of Israel. He's the King of righteousness. He's the King of the ages. He's the King of heaven. He's the King of glory. He's the King of kings and He is the Lord of lords. That's my King! I wonder... do you know Him?

My King is a sovereign King; no means of measure can define His limitless love. He's enduringly strong. He's entirely sincere. He's eternally steadfast. He's immortally graceful. He's imperially powerful. He's impartially merciful. Do you know Him?

He's the greatest phenomenon that has ever crossed the horizon of this world. He's God's Son. He's a sinner's Savior. He's the centerpiece of civilization. He's unparalleled. He's unprecedented. He is the loftiest idea in literature. He's the highest personality in philosophy. He's the fundamental doctrine of true theology! He's the only one qualified to be an all-sufficient Savior! I wonder if you know Him today.

He supplies strength for the weak. He's available for the tempted and tried. He sympathizes and He saves. He strengthens and sustains. He guards and guides. He heals the sick. He cleansed the lepers. He forgives sinners. He discharges debtors. He delivers the captives. He defends the feeble. He blesses the young. He serves the unfortunate. He regards the aged. He rewards the diligent and beautifies the meek. I wonder if you know Him.

He is the key to knowledge. He is the wellspring of wisdom. He's the way of deliverance. He's the pathway of peace. He's the roadway of righteousness. He's the highway of holiness. He's the gateway of glory. Do you know Him?

Well, His life is matchless. His goodness is limitless. His mercy is everlasting. His love never changes. His Word is enough. His grace is sufficient. His reign is righteous, and His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.

I wish I could describe Him to you. Yes! He's indescribable. He's incomprehensible. He's invincible. He's irresistible. You can't get Him out of your mind. You can't get him off your hand. You can't outlive Him, and you can't live without Him.

Well, the Pharisees couldn't stand Him, but they found out they couldn't stop Him. Pilate couldn't find any fault in Him. Herod couldn't kill Him. Death couldn't handle Him, and the grave couldn't hold Him!

Yes! That's my King! That's my King!