

economic practices, false prophets, greedy priests, loss of order and, most tellingly, a rejection of God's justice and God's commandments.

The first five verses of chapter 6 are a slide show of the past: God brought the people out of slavery in Egypt. God delivered them from their enemies. Yet, they rejected the very One who saved them. How could they possibly be blessed, let alone be a blessing to the nations? They were no longer great and no longer good, either. Through the prophet, God delivers judgment on the nation, but, as always with God in the prophetic literature, that judgment is also tempered with hope. God tells the people that they will be restored.

So, how do they (and we) get back on track? We learn first that it won't be because of the greatness in our religious practices. *"With what shall I come before the LORD and bow myself before God on high?"* asks the prophet. *"Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Should I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"* (vv. 6-7). These are all ridiculously expensive sacrifices. This is sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins on a grand scale. Micah questioned if such a superior religious performance is what God really desired of the people.

Take this forward to the church and we might ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord? With our great buildings, our filled seats, our million-dollar budgets? Will God be pleased if we show God that we're more successful in missions than the church down the street? Is bigger, better, faster, and stronger the sign of the kind of church God blesses or the kind of nation God blesses? Is greatness what God is really after?"

Micah says, "No!" Micah says instead: *[God] has told you, O mortal, what is good* (v. 8). What does the Lord desire? Goodness, not greatness. Goodness is God's desire all along, from the very first moments of creation, when God saw everything and called it *good*.

What does such goodness look like? How do we measure it? The prophet says that goodness begins with doing justice (v. 8). The Hebrew word *mispat* (justice) refers to God's order for all of life. To "do justice," in other words, means that we order all of our lives, including our interactions with others, in accordance with God's will. The first aspect of goodness is thus a recognition that we have no goodness of our own! God is the one who sets the standard of goodness, and nothing we say or do can be good if it is not said or done according to God's will. Rev. Kurt Tomlinson says, "Goodness is something that is all of God, whereas 'greatness' is what we humans attempt." When we "do justice," we recognize that goodness is defined by what God wills and empowers, and not by what we want or desire.

Micah builds on "justice" by saying that true goodness is also the result of loving "*kindness*" (v. 8). The Hebrew word *hesed* is sometimes translated as "kindness" or "mercy," but it is primarily a word connected to covenant faithfulness to God and to others. The word is often used to convey God's "steadfast," faithful love for God's people (Ps. 118). Being good means that we maintain faithfulness to God in all things and demonstrate that faithfulness by our steadfast love for God and for all God's people.

Here's how that works. Sin is primarily about breaking covenant with God. Israel had broken her covenant with God in favor of seeking greatness on her own. But remember that great is the enemy of good and that God requires faithfulness from us, and that faithfulness should look more like obedience. We remember the covenant God makes with us in our baptism and we live it out day to day in all that we say and do. We are called to love such faithfulness and carry it out in community with God and with each other.

Lastly, says Micah, being good means walking humbly with God (v. 8). In Hebrew, the word *hasenea* means more than modesty and humility: it implies attentiveness, particularly toward God. The people are to watch God to see what is good and not do their own thing and call it good.

In our desire to be great, we often miss what is good. We fail to pay attention to what God would have us do. We fail to pray, to seek God's face, to discern together what the will of God might be. In church meetings, this looks like lobbying and voting. At home, it looks more like neglecting daily prayer and reading the Scriptures and failing to gather with the people of God. And if we pay attention to God only when we need something from God, we are really pursuing greatness on our own. And that is a formula for failure. But when we pay attention to God, and humble ourselves, it is then that we begin to stay faithful to the covenant and do justice as servants of God. It's only then that we actually become good because we are embracing God's goodness.

Granted, it's tempting to go after greatness. Greatness gets your name on the cover of the magazine. Greatness gets you the award, the gold watch, and the recognition we believe we deserve. But God doesn't require greatness: just goodness. Goodness is much more sustainable. When we focus on doing God's will, being faithful to God's covenant and being attentive to God's leading, we have done all that we were meant to do, regardless of whether the results impress anyone else.

The early Christian church seemed to have embraced a goodness-over-greatness strategy for its own growth. Historian Alan Kreider looked at the rapid growth of the early church to see exactly what caused the church to grow during a time when it was underground and persecuted. We would expect him to find that it was about measures of greatness – grand evangelism strategies, great preaching, attractive worship, superior leadership, better methods – all things that we measure and value in a good-to-great culture.

But the truth is that, in every case, Kreider discovered that the real virtue that caused the early church to grow was *patient faithfulness*. Church leaders spent up to three years examining people before admitting them to membership, during which they trained them in faithfulness and to represent the character of Christ. Interestingly, their documents reveal that they didn't have much of a focus on evangelism or on preaching. Instead, it was about cultivating faithfulness and building up people who acted like Jesus. The early church attracted others not because of their success but because of their character: they focused on goodness, not greatness. They measured success by growing good people rather than by growing a great church.

That should be our measurement as well. Are we doing justice, seeking the will of God in everything we do? Do we love faithfulness, living out the covenant with God we made in our baptism? And are we walking humbly, paying attention to what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us? That's what the Lord requires of us.

Prayer: Give us, O Lord, an eye for injustice. For it is only when we are able to recognize injustice and feel its awful sting that we will be moved to make things right. Give us, O Lord, a tender heart. Sometimes we are too hard-hearted to recognize when we have been uncaring, unfeeling, or unkind. Grant us, O Lord, the ability to view life from the dust. All our lives we're taught to make others proud, to be proud of ourselves, to hold our heads high – all the while missing the virtues of being poor in spirit. Teach us, O Lord, to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with you. Amen

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From Great to Good

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Micah 6:1-8

In 2001, business and leadership writer Jim Collins wrote the bestselling book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. Collins conducted research on 11 companies that had "made the leap" to greatness and chronicled why "good is the enemy of great." Collins defined "greatness" as having "distinctive impact" and "superior performance" shepherded by a "level five leader." The idea, of course, is that if you're not yet great, you have some work to do.

The problem, however, is that greatness isn't easy to sustain. Of the 11 "great" companies that Collins profiled, most are not so great a decade and a half later: Circuit City went out of business, buried by competition from other retailers; Fannie Mae (Federal National Mortgage Association) received a bailout by the government and is seen by many as a major contributor to the mortgage crisis; Pitney Bowes lost half its market cap between 2001 and 2012; Five of the companies (Abbott Labs, Kimberly-Clark, Kroger, Walgreens and Wells Fargo) have made only modest market gains; Gillette sold out; only Nucor (a steel producer) and Philip Morris (the tobacco producer) remain "great" according to Collins' criteria.

It seems that past results do not always predict future performance. But it does raise a question: Is greatness really the best goal for an organization, a nation, a business or a church? The prophet Micah didn't seem to think so. When we turn to the Scriptures, one of the things we realize is that greatness is vastly overrated. In fact, rather than the good being the enemy of the great, biblically speaking, greatness is the enemy of goodness.

Things were not so great in Micah's day. Micah wrote to the nation of Judah during a time when the nation was under the thumb of the Assyrian Empire. Most of the people remembered when Israel was a great nation, and many wondered how to get that greatness back again. Micah recalls Genesis 12, where God promised Abraham that his offspring would become a "great" nation through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed. But greatness is contingent upon consistency over time, and Israel demonstrated that it could not sustain that greatness. The kingdom that had reached its height of greatness during the days of David and Solomon was, by the time of Micah, a shadow of its former self, divided and conquered. Micah chronicles how the nation lost its way through oppression of the poor, corruption in its courts, dishonest