

# Extreme Virtues

BY DAVID FILLINGIM

**“Extreme,” that buzzword of Generation X, is a good word for Christian discipleship. In their lives and teachings, the prophets of Israel show the extreme virtues of justice, steadfast love, and humility before God which we should exhibit as individuals and in our life together.**

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The word “extreme” is now a buzzword in our culture as “Generation X” has ascended to media prominence. In addition to *extreme* sports (accompanied, Madison Avenue tells us, by *extreme* thirst, which in turn requires an *extreme* sports drink), we have *extreme* fashion, *extreme* travel, *extreme* adventure, and *extreme* music.

“Extreme” is also a good word for Christian discipleship. No one wants to be what we disparagingly call “a religious extremist.” But the life to which God’s people are called is indeed an extreme commitment. How can we be extreme in our faith without being “extremists”? That’s where the prophets can help us.

The prophets of Israel were often extreme individuals. Consider the ecstatic frenzies of Elijah and Elisha, the harsh pronouncements of Amos and Micah, the strange marriage of Hosea, or the wild symbolic antics of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. If those prophets were alive today, they just might be more at home among the purple-haired and body-pierced than among the staunch, stolid, well-groomed churchgoing crowd. They were extreme in their commitment to the God who had called them, and they were extreme in presenting the message they had been given to proclaim.

In their lives and teachings, the prophets of Israel exhibit extreme virtues that combine to form a portrait of the kind of character that we, as God’s people, should exhibit as individuals and in our life together. That nutshell summary of the prophets’ message, Micah 6:8, calls for three virtues: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD

require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

## **JUSTICE**

The first virtue in Micah’s list is justice, a central ethical demand of the prophets and all of Scripture. Amos was the first classical prophet to proclaim God’s demand for justice: “But let justice roll down like waters, and

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righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The situation that prompted Amos to demand justice was one of systematic mistreatment of the poor. The prophet catalogs the many ways God’s people have come to “trample on the poor” (5:12), thus violating God’s

covenant demands. Because of these injustices, God no longer accepts Israel’s worship; indeed, injustice has made their worship an annoyance to God (5:21-23). Justice requires fair treatment of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized; it means full inclusion of everyone in the life of the community. Amos proclaims that God demands justice in daily dealings, not shallow, meaningless piety in weekly worship.

As an ethical demand or principle, then, justice is about restoring the marginalized to their rightful place as full participants in the community. But what does it mean to claim that justice is an extreme *virtue* which God’s people should develop and embody in the way we live? For, indeed, biblical justice is not merely an abstract principle or ideal; it is a raging river (Amos 5:24), a force waiting to burst into concrete reality and overflow through God’s people into a world parched by injustice.

As an extreme virtue, justice means compassion for the poor. Such compassion will be embodied in our attitudes, actions, and relationships—not merely our personal relationships, but our social, professional, and economic relationships as well. How? We can begin developing habits of compassionate justice by taking small steps: Treat the low-wage service workers with whom we come into contact daily as persons whose dignity is equal to our own rather than as servants or as mere cogs in the economic machine. Avoid humor that dehumanizes groups of people. Vote for candidates whose policies resemble the biblical standard of justice as compassion for the poor instead of merely reflecting our own economic self-interest. When we learn of specific economic injustices, avoid supporting the businesses responsible. Volunteer at the local homeless shelter, food closet, or soup kitchen. Support charitable organizations that work on behalf of the

poor. While charity is no substitute for economic justice, charitable work is consistent with compassion for the poor. Support organizations that lobby for more just social policy. Teach our children the equality of all people. Combat materialism by buying second-hand goods. Through small steps such as these we can grow toward lives characterized by justice.

### **STEADFAST LOVE**

The second virtue in Micah's list is *hesed*, which can be translated "mercy" (NRSV), "lovingkindness," "faithfulness," or "steadfast love." *Hesed* is God's covenant love, which is steadfast even when God's people waver in their love, devotion, and faithfulness. The prophet Hosea most clearly portrays God's demand that God's people demonstrate steadfast love. He presents a dialogue between God and God's people, on the nature of love and of God's demands. In this dialogue, the people speak first, expressing their intention to repent of their unfaithfulness and return to their God (Hosea 6:1, 3). But, surprisingly, God responds by rejecting their repentance:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?  
 What shall I do with you, O Judah?  
 Your love is like a morning cloud,  
 like the dew that goes away early.

Hosea 6:4

Wait a minute, God says. I've heard this song and dance before. I know you, and I know your ways. Your repentance is superficial. Your love is not a deep and abiding love. Your love is like the fog or the morning dew; it's refreshing while it lasts but it evaporates quickly in the heat of the day. Such love is not the love God demands: "For I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

God demands *hesed*. Remember that *hesed* is God's covenant love which is steadfast despite our unfaithfulness, a love that does not wane or waver when times or circumstances change. *Hesed* is the essence of God's own character and is expected of God's people. So here we have an important lesson about virtue in general and the virtue of steadfast love in particular: the people of God are to model their character after God's own character. God is faithful to them; therefore, they are to be steadfast in their devotion to God and merciful in their dealings with one another. This is *hesed*: mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, and steadfast love.

Because steadfast love is an abiding faithfulness, it is more than mere emotion. It is seen in the ability to make and keep commitments. When the prophets call for steadfast love, or when Jesus commands us to love our neighbor, they are not instructing us to have warm fuzzy feelings for one another. The feeling of love, like all feelings, is not completely reliable.

Feelings come and go; they can vary with changes in our external circumstances or in our body chemistry. God calls us to practice love, to do loving things consistently and habitually, whether or not the feeling of love is present. By practicing love, we become loving people.

We are to practice steadfast love in all our relationships. The implications may be clearest in intimate relationships such as marriage, parenting, or close friendship. But steadfast love means treating all people with kindness, mercy, and compassion, and showing integrity, loyalty, and dependability in all our interactions, regardless of whether we happen to like the people to whom we relate.

Most importantly, we are to practice steadfast love in our relationship to God. Steadfast love means continuing to practice devotion through the changeableness of religious feelings. We need to worship, pray, and read scripture faithfully, avoiding the temptation to let our spiritual discipline slide when we get too busy, or when things are going so well we don't see the need to take time to pray. We also must avoid the temptation to abandon our spiritual discipline in the darker times, when we feel that God is distant, when prayers seem to go unanswered, or when we are at the receiving end of the injustice that often characterizes life in a sinful and fallen world. There is room for us to be angry at God within the bounds of steadfast love. Like Jeremiah and Elijah, we can take our complaints to God rather than allowing them to become a wedge driven between us and our maker. Steadfast love is a matter of commitment, and a true commitment to God will endure through the emotion-laden ebb and flow in our spiritual life.

### **HUMILITY**

To "walk humbly" with our God is the third virtue in Micah's list. In essence, humility is the attitude that makes justice and steadfast love possible. The injustice and unfaithfulness against which the prophets preach can be seen as failures of humility. Injustice obviously manifests a lack of humility, for when we oppress a neighbor we adopt a position of superiority over that person. Injustice is a failure to accept our true standing in relation to the God who is "exalted by justice" and before whom "the eyes of the haughty are humbled" (Isaiah 5:15-16).

Before we can appreciate the justice of God, we must acknowledge our spiritual poverty. We possess nothing with which we can make ourselves presentable to God. We fail to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. As sinners, utterly impoverished before God, we cannot justify ourselves. So God provides a means for our justification; this is the gospel. What we cannot provide for ourselves, God provides for us. God's justice, therefore, means compassion for poor sinners.

When we fully appreciate God's justice in light of our own spiritual poverty, we realize that everything we have stems from God's compassion,

that we have not earned any of the things with which God has blessed us. Our talents, opportunities, material resources, and loved ones, are all gifts from God. Therefore, none of these things presents a basis for thinking of ourselves more highly than we think of others. For this is another aspect of our spiritual poverty: before an infinitely good God, all of us are equally impoverished. All children of dust are equally children of God.

To practice injustice toward another person is to fail to recognize our own spiritual poverty. It is colossal arrogance: putting ourselves in the place of God, acting as if we are the source of our own abilities, and lord-ing over others. Humility is the only effective antidote to injustice.

Unfaithfulness, which is our failure of steadfast love, often flows from a lack of humility, a spiritual blindness to our true standing before God. We act as if we are not dependent on God for our resources. "She did not know," God says of Israel through the prophet Hosea, "that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, who lavished upon her the silver and gold that they used for Baal" (Hosea 2:8). In our unfaithfulness we arrogantly take the gifts of God for granted or even credit other sources for God's blessings. We treat other things as more worthy of our attention and devotion than God. Once again, an appropriate humility that acknowledges God for who God is, can support our steadfast love and be a perfect remedy to unfaithfulness.

## **CONCLUSION**

God's people are called not to moderation, but to an extreme commitment. We are called to live lives of extreme virtue, demonstrating justice, steadfast love, humility, and other godly traits in our attitudes and behaviors. The lives and teachings of the biblical prophets, those extreme servants of God, can help shape our character as disciples of Jesus.<sup>†</sup>

## **NOTE**

<sup>†</sup>Thanks to the publisher for permission to use material from my forthcoming book, *Extreme Virtues: Living on the Prophetic Edge* (Herald Press, 2003).



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