



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Extreme Virtues
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 63-67)

Suggested Article:

📖 Lord Have Mercy
(*Prophetic Ethics*, pp. 71-74)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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Extreme Virtues

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to exhibit the extreme virtues which characterized the lives and teachings of Israel's prophets, such as justice, steadfast love, and humility.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Micah 6:1-8

Responsive Reading

Lord, we confess to you,
in the presence of our sisters and brothers,
that we have sinned.

We have not heeded your words.

We hear the prophetic call to return

**to your ways of humbleness, generosity, and peace;
yet we turn to other voices that promise us
power, wealth, and control.**

Forgive us, Lord,
for our weakness when we are so easily tempted.

Hear these words of confession:

Send your Spirit

**into eyes that will see visions of the people we should be,
into hands that will help lead us back onto the path,
into voices that will sing songs enticing us to holiness,
and even into us, that we might grow to know your love.**

Amen.

Reflection

The people of Israel often exploited the vulnerable, rather than care for them; they embraced violence and war, instead of loving their enemies; and they worshiped idols, not Yahweh alone. God was not pleased. With their extreme behaviors Israel's prophets personified God's rebuke and call to repentance; they called the people of Israel to extreme commitment and discipleship.

What does extreme discipleship look like? Micah points out three virtues: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

- ▶ *Justice*: The call to do justice echoes through the prophetic writings. "Let justice roll down like waters," Amos thunders as he compares it to a raging river flowing over a parched desert of injustice (Amos 5:24). Justice requires fair treatment of all people. "It means the full inclusion of everyone in the life of the community," particularly the poor and weak. "As an ethical demand or principle," Fillingim points out, "justice is about restoring the marginalized to their rightful place as full participants in the community."

Justice for the poor involves our social, professional, and economic relationships, as well as our personal relationships.

Treating lower-wage workers as equals, supporting political candidates who redress the needs of the poor and marginalized, not supporting businesses when they are involved in unfair practices, and volunteering with relief organizations that help the poor are first steps toward embodying justice.



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► *Steadfast Love*: “Mercy,” “faithfulness,” and “loving-kindness” are other translations of Micah’s word, *hesed*. It is a word used to describe God’s covenant love for us, even when we waver in our love and devotion to God. “Here we have an important lesson about virtue in general and the virtue of steadfast love in particular,” Fillingim notes: God instructs us to deal with others, not as they treat us, but as God cares for us. God calls us to practice loving-kindness in all of our relationships, with strangers, friends, loved ones, and God, despite “the changeableness of religious feelings” or of our emotions toward other people.

Hosea paints a beautiful picture of God’s *hesed*. God’s heart aches for the Israelites who have committed spiritual adultery by worshipping idols. Instead of chastising them, God extends mercy. Though our imitating this divine behavior would run contrary to the world’s standards, God calls us “to give freely of mercy because it has been freely given to us,” Slaton observes.

► *Humility*: True humility makes justice and mercy possible. When we oppress and mistreat others, we act as though we are superior to them in a fundamental way. This shows a lack of humility, says Fillingim, “a failure to accept our true standing in relation to God.” In truth, we are utterly dependent; “our talents, our opportunities, our material resources, our loved ones, are all gifts from God.” None of these provide us a basis for thinking more highly of ourselves than others.

Study Questions

1. Fillingim emphasizes several “small steps” to help us “grow toward having our lives characterized by justice,” particularly in relation to the poor and marginalized in our society. What other small steps might you take as an individual, or with your study group or congregation? Do you agree that small steps are the place for us to start?
2. What small steps might help us to grow in steadfast love toward our families, friends, strangers, and God?
3. Discuss Fillingim’s comment: “While charity is no substitute for economic justice, charitable work is consistent with compassion for the poor.” Why is it important to distinguish economic justice from charity?
4. Does practicing mercy, or steadfast love, have no limits? Consider the prayer from the Ravensbruck concentration camp, which Lea Slaton quotes (p. 74). What would it take for a person to reach this level of divine imitation?
5. Do you agree with Fillingim that spiritual poverty plays an important role in forming the virtues of justice and steadfast love?

Departing Hymn: “Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak”

Extreme Virtues

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To sketch the extreme virtues of justice, steadfast love, and humility.
2. To consider how these prophetic virtues are integrally related to one another, being grounded in the imitation of God and the recognition of our spiritual poverty.
3. To consider how we may grow in these virtues through regular, small actions.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prophetic Ethics (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. Locate CANONBURY, the tune for “Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak,” in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Retell the story of Sister Helen Prejean, the nun featured in the movie *Dead Man Walking*. Lea Pardue Slayton’s summary of Sister Prejean’s story begins, “We are called as God’s children to be the hands and faces of [God’s] mercy in our unmerciful world” (*Prophetic Ethics*, p. 72).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Voice a request that members will hear the prophetic call to develop extreme virtues of justice, mercy, and humility.

Scripture Reading

Ask two members to read Micah 6:1-5 and 6:6-8 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold.

Reflection

The scripture reading from Micah 6:1-8 is like observing a courtroom drama. God asks creation (including the mountains, hills and foundations of the earth) to hear his case against the people of Israel. “Oh my people,” cries the Lord in response to Israel’s unfaithfulness, “what have I done to you?” God’s opening argument recounts three defining “saving acts” of God on Israel’s behalf: liberating the people from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 1-15), thwarting Moabite King Balak’s desire to curse the Israelites by inspiring the prophet Balaam to pronounce lavish blessings upon them (Numbers 22-24), and leading the people to cross the Jordan River on dry land from Shittim to Gial (Joshua 3-5:10).

These salvation events seal God’s case against Israel. In sarcastic exasperation Israel shoots back, “Very well, what settlement will please you? Burnt offerings? Rams and rivers of oil? How about our firstborn?” (Micah 6:6-7).

Perhaps the prophet Micah (or is it the mountains and hills of creation?) responds to Israel: these three things God requires—to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to brainstorm practical actions they can do, in addition to the ones Fillingim lists, which will foster lifestyles of justice. Encourage them to be specific. What local organizations might they support? When and how? Is there an important issue to raise with their city council or political representatives? Does someone know where to purchase fair-trade goods? Challenge and help one another to put some of these ideas into practice. How might your study group lead your congregation to promote justice?
2. Small steps are easier to take, and they build habits of attention, caring, and reacting that shape all of our actions. You might divide members into smaller working groups to focus upon steadfast love in families, among friends and colleagues, toward strangers, and toward God. Give them time to summarize their ideas and report to the entire study group.
3. When we treat people with economic justice, we provide the goods or services they have a moral right to receive; we are not giving them anything that they do not deserve. Charity, on the other hand, flows from the personal generosity of the giver, and graciously helps someone in need. Justice should be the bare minimum in how we treat the poor, and charity would be a welcome addition.
4. Some members may not be familiar with the story of Sister Helen Prejean and the death-row inmate Matthew Poncelet. Her decision to minister to Poncelet outraged nearly everyone. How could she demonstrate God's love to this self-confessed rapist and murderer when he deserved punishment? How could a Holocaust victim pray for God to forgive the Nazi oppressors? Ask members to respond to these two confounding accounts of mercy.
5. Spiritual poverty means our fundamental lack of worthiness before God's evaluation. "We possess nothing with which we can make ourselves presentable to God," writes Fillingim. "Everything we have stems from God's compassion." By keeping this truth in mind, we can cultivate gratitude and love toward God, and humility toward other people as our equals. Such humility, Fillingim points out, enables justice and steadfast love toward others to flourish; lack of humility precludes these virtues.

Departing Hymn

"Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak" is reprinted on p. 49 of *Prophetic Ethics*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.