

**“Biblical Justice, Part 7:
Keeping a Christian Perspective on Ourselves (Humble Listening)”
Micah 2
October 3, 2021
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pastor Nicoletti**

We return again this evening to our “parenthetical” series on biblical justice, in the middle of our larger series on the Book of Micah.

We will have just two more sermons on Biblical justice, including tonight.

In our first five sermons in this series, we sketched a theology of Biblical justice. In these final three sermons, last Lord’s Day, tonight, and then next Sunday evening, we are focusing on a few ways we can lose our way when it comes to this topic – a few ways we can wander from a Biblical orientation on these kinds of questions.

Last Lord’s Day we focused on keeping a Christian perspective on problems, solutions, and our alliances with others as we work for justice.

This evening we are focusing on keeping a Christian perspective of ourselves. And tonight I will focus on one particular dimension of ourselves that we need to keep a Christian perspective on: our limitedness, our locatedness, and our need to be willing to learn from other parts of the Body of Christ.

With that in mind, we will hear again from Micah chapter two, verse six through the first line of verse eight (which takes us just a line past what you have printed in the bulletin).

Please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this evening.

^{2:6} “Do not preach”—thus they preach—
“one should not preach of such things;
disgrace will not overtake us.”

⁷ Should this be said, O house of Jacob?
Has Yahweh grown impatient?
Are these his deeds?

Do not my words do good
to him who walks uprightly?

⁸ But lately my people have risen up as an enemy;

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Introduction

We’ve heard this portion of Micah before, so I don’t plan to rehash what I’ve already said.

Instead, I want to focus on a tendency they highlight.

We can have trouble listening at times. We can have trouble hearing truth from others. But tonight, I want to consider our calling to listen to others – particularly our calling to listen to Christians who are different from us, and who bring a different perspective on both the world and the Word of God, than we do.

As we do that, I want to consider two reasons why we need to listen to others, two reasons we resist listening to others, two aspects of how we need to listen to others, and then, appropriately, we will end by listening to the words of a minister from a different tradition and cultural background than most of us.

Why We Need to Listen to Others

First, why we need to listen to others.

And we could say a lot here, but let's mention just two things this evening: we need to listen to others because we are limited and because we are located.

We Are Limited

First, we are limited – we are finite. That is not a bad thing, but it is part of how God made us from the beginning. We are limited. And this requires us to listen to others.

Even before the fall this would have been the case. Adam and Eve were limited. One of them could learn something without the other being there to learn it at the same time, and so one would have to then tell the other about it, and the other would have to listen and learn. We could imagine this extending even more so if the fall had not happened and unfallen humanity had increased more and more in number.

Of course with the fall, that need became even more pronounced, and that finiteness became more prone not just to ignorance, but to error. We are not just lacking knowledge, we often hold to false knowledge, believing things that are not true about the world.

And one way God has given us to correct these effects of our limitedness is to learn from others – especially from others within the Body of Christ.

This is the concept that C.S. Lewis hits on in his essay on reading old books. Lewis writes that if we only interact with other people who are like us, then even when we disagree with them strongly about something – even when we launch into intense debates with them – we often fail to realize how many things we are both assuming and agreeing on, even within that debate. But since we are so similar, neither of us sees those things and neither of us is able to show the other one where we might be wrong in those assumptions. Lewis writes: “Nothing strikes me more when I read controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united [...] by a mass of common assumptions.” [Lewis, 12-13]

And we do the same thing.

Lewis's solution is to read old books – books from different ages, which will each have their own errors, but will at least be unlikely to make the same errors we make. And so, they can serve as a corrective. [Lewis, 13]

And that is good advice. But it's not the only advice we need. We should seek correction from our finiteness, and the errors that come from it, by seeking out and listening to members of the Body of Christ from different ages, that is true. But the diversity of the Church is not only chronological.

We also can address our finiteness, and seek correction from the errors that may come from our limited experience by seeking out and listening to members of the Body of Christ from different classes than us ... or different nationalities than us ... or different races than us, or a different gender than us, and we could go on.

Again, it's not because any particular age, or class, or nationality, or race, or gender is better than the others – in fact it's for the exact opposite reason: each has a somewhat different perspective, and so each is able to help and bless each other.

So one reason we need to listen to others within the Body of Christ is because we are limited.

We Are Located

A second, and somewhat linked reason we need to listen to others is because we are located. We are not just limited in our perceptions, but we are located in a certain time and place and culture. And that has benefits and drawbacks because every culture has gifts and shortcomings.

This is, in many ways, also what Lewis was speaking about as well, but what I want to impress on us is that this can be something we tend to overlook. And that can be true particularly in places where we are in the majority culture. Then we don't see our cultural locatedness, even as we see the cultural locatedness of those different from us.

Tim Keller, in the foreword to Irwyn Ince's recent book addresses this. Keller tells of his time in seminary, and some of the lessons an African American student named Elward Ellis taught him at the time. One of those lessons, he says, is that "Euro-white culture is nearly invisible to white Christians. 'When you come to my church,' [Elward] said, 'and you see how we worship and sing and preach, you think "that's the black way.'" But when you look at your own church you just think "that's the right way.'"" [In Ince, 2]

It is often easy for many of us to see our culture as neutral – whether it is the culture of our class, our race, our nation, or something else. But our culture is an aspect of our locatedness.

And our locatedness is not a bad thing – it is good, it is part of the particularity and diversity with which God made the world and humanity. And so our goal is not some sort of cultural uniformity.

Our goal, rather, is to share the blessings of our culture, while also seeking help from other cultures to correct our errors and to help us with our blind spots.

So, we are limited, and we are located. These truths will help us see some things clearly, but without the correction and insight of those different from us, they may also leave us with blind spots and areas of ignorance.

Why We Resist Listening to Others

In the abstract sense, our need to learn from those different from us is fairly obvious and straightforward. And yet, in practice, it is often something we resist.

Now, to be clear, when I say that we “resist” this, I’m not speaking against any time we disagree with others different from us – we will get to that. I’m not talking about how we might disagree with people who are different from us, I’m talking about how we can be resistant to really even listening to people who are different from us.

Two reasons for that are because we are arrogant, and we are hard-hearted.

Now, before going on, let me be clear. I’m using a “universal we” here.

First, I am definitely including myself in this. I’m not pretending to be someone who’s done a lot of this well already and is now lecturing you on it – I’ve done less of this than many of you. I am speaking to myself as much as anyone else.

Second, I’m not targeting any particular race or class or other demographic with these statements. So, for example, I’m not just saying that white people are arrogant and hard-hearted, as some are accused of saying – I’m saying that *all* of fallen humanity is arrogant and hard-hearted.

We all, in our fallenness, tend towards arrogance and hard-heartedness, both of which make us more resistant to being corrected – especially by people different from us.

We Are Arrogant

First, we are arrogant. We like to believe we know everything. We like to believe we know better than other people. We don’t like admitting that another person or another group may see something important that we missed.

That leads us to want to be resistant to the idea that other people – especially those different from us – have something to teach us.

That arrogance, that this person different from me couldn’t possibly have anything to teach me, makes us resistant to listening to and learning from others.

We Are Hard-Hearted

Second, we are hard-hearted. By which I mean that we are resistant to admitting our sins and our shortcomings. And so, when anyone tells us that we have fallen short, that we may have sinned, or missed something, or been wrong about something, part of us always wants to resist. Part of us always wants to defend ourselves. That is human nature.

And so we resist listening to other believers who are different from us because we, as fallen human beings, are sinful and hard-hearted.

How We Need to Listen to Others

So we need to listen to others because we are limited and located. We often resist listening to others because we are arrogant and hard-hearted.

Third, let's talk about *how* we need to listen to others.

We need to listen thoughtfully, and humbly.

Listening Thoughtfully

First, we need to listen thoughtfully. We are always called on to consider everything in light of the Word of God. We are to evaluate our own thoughts, we are to evaluate the thoughts of those who are like us within the Body of Christ, we are to evaluate the thoughts of those different from us within the Body of Christ, and we are to evaluate the thoughts of those outside the Body of Christ, always, according to the Word of God.

Now, we need to make sure we do that by the Word of God itself, and not by our assumptions about the Word of God. And often the thoughts of others will help to mature, or refine, or correct our understanding of what we see in the Word of God. But always, the Word of God is our judge.

And so we are called to listen to others thoughtfully.

Listening Humbly

But second, and with that, we are also to listen humbly. We also are to listen with the knowledge that it may be that *we* are the ones who need to be evaluated and corrected, and not others. We need to always be willing to be corrected by insights from the Scripture that others see, but we missed. We need to humbly be willing to see truths that we had previously overlooked.

This means listening humbly.

That is part of what it means to be a part of the Body of Christ.

In First Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul speaks to this. He writes: “¹² For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

Paul there emphasizes the unity of the Body. It is a unity of different national, religious, and ethnic backgrounds (as Paul mentions Jews and Greeks), it is a unity of different social classes (as Paul mentions slaves and free). Paul here stresses their unity.

But then Paul goes on to highlight how that unity works. As he describes it, it is not a unity that comes about by the obliteration or papering over or ignoring of these kinds of differences, but rather by the proper relationship between them, of serving one another. It is a unity in diversity for the good and upbuilding of the Body.

Paul goes on and writes:

“¹⁴ For the body does not consist of one member but of many. ¹⁵ If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of

the body. ¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? ¹⁸ But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. ¹⁹ If all were a single member, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.”

Let me mention two things this means.

One is that we need to make sure we are listening to those different from us from whom we think we might learn something new, and not just those whom we think will affirm what we already believe. In other words, if the only times you listen to people of a different race or class or gender, is when you expect them to tell you what’s wrong with other members of their race or class or gender, then you might not be listening to learn – you might just be listening to gather rhetorical ammunition to use against those who are different from you.

Second, to borrow a phrase from C3, this means we must be committed to listening to hear, rather than listening to respond.

When we listen to hear, we genuinely want to understand the other point of view. We may or may not agree with it in the end, but we know that our first step is not responding or planning our response – it is listening to hear and to make sure we really do understand what the other person is saying, and what they mean.

Listening to respond is what it sounds like. It is listening that is focused on gathering arrows for rebuttal, but that does not stop to really hear and consider what’s being said.

And so, we are called to listen thoughtfully, and listen humbly.

Listening to Esau McCauley

That said, let’s take some of our time tonight to listen to the words of a minister from a different background than many of us in our church.

Esau McCauley is a pastor in the ACNA, a conservative Anglican denomination that has theological overlap with our own denomination, and that the last few years has had a delegate invited to address our General Assembly each year.

McCauley is also a professor at Wheaton College.

Tonight, I’ll read from his book titled *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*.

The title may sound provocative, but it is essentially about the historic hermeneutic of the Black church – what McCauley calls Black ecclesial interpretation – and what that hermeneutic can offer the Church today. It is a very good book. And in the first chapter, McCauley speaks to the sort of things we have talked about tonight. And he speaks to them from the vantage point of a Black Christian and minister, who grew up in the Black church.

With that said, let's hear for the next few minutes from Rev. McCaulley.

[The following are extended excerpts from Esau McCauley's *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, pages 4-22]

Conclusion

Now ... what are we to take from all of this?

What I hope for you to take from tonight is a deeper sense of why we need to listen to and learn from Christians who are different from us – not primarily so they can affirm what we already think, but so that we can learn something we did not know or see before.

Because we are finite creatures, we are limited, and we are located. That is not bad, it's just what we are. God's answer is the Body of Christ – he gives us the Body, with its unity in diversity, to help us see more of the truth than we otherwise could in our limitedness and locatedness.

That said, because we are sinful, we resist this, out of arrogance and hard-heartedness.

But God calls us to listen – to listen both thoughtfully and humbly. To think critically, but be open to ways we may be wrong or ignorant.

We heard from Esau McCauley on how this works, and on some of the unique insights that the Black church has had to offer, and continues to offer.

But this is not just about race. Whether race, or class, or nationality, or gender, or some other aspect, God has made his church diverse. And there are things to learn from those different from us.

That is true in all sorts of ways. But it is especially true in areas of societal justice. Upper-middle-class white-collar workers are often ignorant and wrong about the kind of challenges others in the economy face. And so, when they consider aspects of societal justice, they would benefit from listening to the insights on the world and the word of God that their brothers and sisters from different socio-economic classes have to offer. In a similar way, whites often miss things that racial minorities see. Men are often oblivious to the challenges and injustices women face. We could go on.

If we just assume, without listening, that we, on our own, understand the injustices others face, or how the Bible might apply to them, we run the risk of denying our limitedness and locatedness, giving in to the temptation to arrogance and hard-heartedness, and failing to listen thoughtfully and humbly.

As we engage with the issue of justice in society, we need to keep a Christian perspective on ourselves. Let's do that by humbly engaging with, and truly listening to, the many different members of the Body of Christ.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

Ince, Irwyn L. *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*. With foreword by Timothy Keller. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.

Keller, Timothy. *Generous Justice*. New York, NY: Penguin, 2010.

Keller, Timothy. "A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory." *Gospel in Life*. Special Edition 2020. August 2020.

Keller, Timothy, "Justice in the Bible." *Gospel in Life*. Quarter 3 2020. September 2020.

McCaulley, Esau. *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020.