

Justice, Kindness, and Humility  
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In my continuing quest to figure out New England, I've been reading Paul Revere's Ride by David Hackett Fisher. It's a dense history book and I still have a long way to go, but he tells fascinating stories about the events surrounding the Revolutionary War. One chapter summarized the Salem Alarm on February 27, 1775. You may already know the story, but let me refresh your memory in case you've forgotten. Colonel Leslie and a group of British Regulars marched from Marblehead to Salem to seize weapons. They waited patiently on a quiet Sunday for folks to go to their respective churches for the afternoon sermon and then sprang into action. The Regulars were so confident as they marched, they decided to announce their presence with a rousing performance of Yankee Doodle.

Meanwhile, a Whig leader, Major John Pedrick, rode into Salem, slowing down and saluting the Regulars on his way there, and they actually even moved over to let him pass. So Major Pedrick went into the churches to warn the people of Salem to hide the weapons. Alarms sounded and in Fisher's words, "The people poured out of their churches and ran to save the guns. Baptists and Congregationalists forgot their differences and joined in a common effort. Even Quaker David Boyce hitched up his team and helped to haul away the heavy cannon." [1] By the time the Regulars got to Salem, there were no weapons to be found. A violent response was prevented by Colonel Leslie and the Congregational minister, Thomas Barnard. I would just note that it was the Congregational minister, not the Baptist minister, who ended up saving the day. Though one strong woman, Sarah Tarrant, yelled at the troops from her window as they retreated in embarrassment, "Go home, and tell your master he sent you on a fool's errand, and has broken the peace of our Sabbath!" [2]

It's a remarkable story about people coming together and standing up for themselves without bloodshed in the months leading up to war. It's funny to picture the Baptists, Congregationalists, and even a Quaker running around hiding weapons. It's a quintessentially American story about some of the virtues we hear at the end of the Prophet Micah's 6th Chapter—justice, kindness, and humility. For folks back then, it was a matter of justice to be able to defend themselves and injustice for the Regulars to seize and destroy property. We see folks working together across denominations and the whole episode not ending in violence even though it could have. There was some level of kindness here in the Colonel and the Minister coming to peaceful terms. And humility, well, things might have gone differently if the presence of the Regulars wasn't declared for the entire countryside to hear. Maybe there's something to be said for humility or subtlety.

Truthfully, when we read Micah's words, it may seem overwhelming with unfamiliar names and a recounting of history back to Moses and thousands of rams and ten thousands of rivers of oil and the potential sacrifice of a firstborn child. But it all comes down to something really remarkable and memorable. This realization that what God requires of us is to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. [3]

For the Prophet Micah, God is more interested in the way people live their everyday lives than in their religious practices. These verses are about our very lifestyles, our total outlook on life, and our ethical values. Micah rejects the notion that there is one thing we can do to make things right between God and humanity when we sin as individuals or systemically. Micah says that the way you make things right as God's people is to live with regard to justice, kindness, and humility.

But here's the catch or the comfort depending on how we see the situation. There's no sacrifice we can make and no action we can perform to be worthy enough to approach God. There's just not. Because what God expects is nothing short of dedicating our whole lives to God. And even then, God knows we'll fall short of God's expectations sometimes. That's where grace comes in. God wants our whole lives, not just by performing outward and occasional acts of piety.[4] It's hard, because like many Prophetic texts in our Hebrew Bible, this one is about our ethical values and that whole concept Jesus would one day proclaim—do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

So we're talking about virtues like being just, kind, and humble inside. Yet Micah, like all good Prophets, is also calling us to action. If God has the expectation that we are God's people not because we're so awesome but because God loves us more than we will ever know, then we should be acting like God's people. Our inner virtues and values should be lining up with our actions, like defending those who are persecuted, standing up in the face of evil, caring for the widow and the orphan and the poor, and shining the light of Christ wherever hopelessness abounds. Today is about being and doing. We hoped we could get away with being just, kind, and humble people. But Micah says we are to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. Do, love, and walk, not simply being just, kind, and humble. Like that Salem Alarm of 1775, this is action-packed and both our virtues and our actions matter.

It reminds me of what Susan Cain argues in her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*. Cain says that America is an overwhelmingly extroverted nation. She explores studies of quiet people versus loud people, relating that there was one experiment where two strangers met over the phone and those who spoke more often in the conversation were considered to be more likable, more intelligent, and even better looking.[5] Keep in mind that these were complete strangers, and yet the talkative person always won the day. These perceptions were based on perceiving talkers as leaders and therefore more worthy of our attention and apparently better looking, more intelligent, and more likable.

Cain argues that in America we moved from being a Culture of Character to a Culture of Personality. In the Culture of Character, the ideal self was disciplined, serious, and honorable—what counted was how someone behaved in private not so much the impression someone made in public. So if one is behaving horribly behind closed doors, in the Culture of Character, one would not be a person that society would admire. In the Culture of Personality, the ideal shifted to how people perceive us, and we all became social performers and a whole lot more anxious as a result. What matters is our public persona and how others respond to us.[6] Americans started to glamorize big personalities, movie stars, and athletes—and these are often the folks society seems to still admire today. Pay attention to who you see on all those Super Bowl ads this evening.

Earlier conduct guides for Americans highlighted good virtues to possess. Yet by 1920, self-help books began to change from inner virtues to outer charms. The new guides began to use words like: "magnetic, fascinating, stunning, attractive, glowing, dominant, forceful, and energetic" to describe the qualities people needed to have in order to be admired. But you either had them or you just didn't.[7] In some ways, our culture became more superficial—caring about what we see on the outside and not inner qualities like honor and integrity.

Micah is calling on us today to take a good, hard look inside ourselves. Because God doesn't want burnt offerings with calves a year old, thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil, and our firstborn children for the transgressions of our souls.[8] No, God wants us to do justice, to work for equality. God wants us to love kindness. The Hebrew word is *hesed*—which is hard to translate into one English word, but it's about love, loyalty, and faithfulness. For Micah it wasn't enough to fear God or to worship God out of duty. *Hesed* was about being faithful out

of deep love and loyalty to God. Walking with God was about putting God first, so that "our life pilgrimage is likened to a walk with God as our constant companion."<sup>[9]</sup>

If we are just, kind, and humble inside or at least trying to be, then it's easier to do, love, and walk with God every day on the outside. And I hope that we will. Thanks be to God, Amen.

[1] David Hackett Fisher, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 60.

[2] David Hackett Fisher, *Paul Revere's Ride*, 63.

[3] Micah 6:8, NRSV.

[4] *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Micah 6:6-8 Commentary, Volume 7, 582-583.

[5] Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, 51.

[6] *Ibid.*, 21.

[7] Susan Cain, *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking*, 24-25.

[8] Micah 6:6-7, NRSV.

[9] *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Micah 6:6-8 Commentary, Volume 7, 580.