

A Micah Christian

Micah 6:8

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We all know that one fan who is loud and obnoxious. They cuss the other team. They can never provide a reasonable assessment of their own team. Their conversation always begins with the word “Best.” The problem with these folks is they are often times the ones you remember. Seriously. Alabama fans are the worst. Georgia fans are the worst. Clemson fans are the worst. South Carolina fans are the worst. We base this broad generalization on an encounter with one fan at a sports bar. Thus we are disregarding all of the enthusiastic but sensible fans who never draw attention to themselves, never cussed you out, and all they have ever done is cheer their team on, they have never prayed for your demise or poisoned trees outside your stadium.

So if I say I am a progressive Christian, my biggest fear is that you are going to think of some lunatic (that loud obnoxious fan) you saw in a video and discount my words because of them. But if I was to say I am a conservative Christian, my biggest fear is that you are going to remember some craziness spouted off by a religious conservative on TV and disregard my words because of them. If I was to say I am a radical Christian, my concern is you will think of that guy wearing the

John 3:16 t-shirt behind home plate with the big afro and turn me off because of him. I could continue—but you get the point.

We would all rather be judged or labeled based on our words or actions, or so I would think, and not the behavior or ideas of another.

A wide variety of theological perspectives can be found in this building. Any statement about what “Pelham Road believes” is almost guaranteed to do an injustice to the personal beliefs of our members. However, there are some theological themes that resonates in our community. We stress that God is a God who creates and loves, not judges and condemns. We emphasize the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus as central to our faith experience. We affirm that the Bible is a primary source for our beliefs and practice, but it is to be practiced, not worshiped.

While I speak each week with the collective “we” I find myself today offering a mixture of confessional and memoir. I do not desire to put you on the hook for any of the things I have come to “stress and hold” in my soul. So allow me to begin by rambling with purpose, to unfold for you the things I hold dear.

I have read the Bible with great frequency since I was 18. So this puts me in my 36th year of reading the Bible. I would still call myself an amateur (which means lover). I would like to share with you not my favorite verse or the most comforting verse. Life is too wide and scripture is too deep for one piece of scripture to sum it up, but here is a scripture that sits at the intersection of many things our God stresses.

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

—Micah 6:8

There is a whole sermon here but I will cut it down to the bullet points.

1. God does ask something of his children.
2. Scripture is not about giving me what I want, religion is not about me getting what I want, Christianity is not about giving me what I want.
3. The faith, founded in God, rooted in a NT relationship with Jesus is about concrete actions (doing).
4. Creating a just world. Living out kindness. Walking in humility with God.

Since I would prefer to label myself I call my thinking about God not liberal or conservative---but Micah. I’m a Micah follower of Jesus Christ.

But I can’t stop there. I’m sure you appreciate me providing a biblical foundation but you may want to know more about what I “stress and hold” in my soul. So in addition to scripture here are a couple of bullet points---

All people are created in the image of God, an expansive love beyond humanity’s limits.

God’s revelation continues, God still speaks, providing relevance and wisdom for society today.

What Jesus teaches us about God is more important than what the church has taught us about Jesus.

I wrestle with the scriptures and seek to understand how they shape me/us to be people of faith in the world. I believe it is the responsibility of believer's to work out their own transformation. My responsibility is to stand by your side in this pursuit, and further to keep my eyes on my own paper.

I practice an understanding that God turns no one away and neither should God's family. The Certain, the Doubtful, the Excluded, the Included, People who are Able and People who are Challenged, Rich, Poor and In Between, Divorced, Single, Married and Widowed; Atheist, Agnostic, Buddhist, Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, Hindu, Jewish, Heterosexual, Homosexual, African-American, Asian, and Latino.

That's five bullet points but even that does not say what I "stress and hold" in my soul. So let me tell you a story.

I know a lot of stories that begin "I grew up conservative/fundamentalist/Baptist/Pentecostal but now I am a progressive Christian." Some of them I like, all of them I suppose are accurate.

I like some of them because they give a lot of credit to the role whatever their origin group played in their faith formation. They are not bitter, they simply no longer see things the same way---but they still stand on the same side of the street. The ones I don't like act like their first faith experiment was a hostage situation. I didn't live through such so maybe it was, but to me it sounds a little too critical.

Some people are turned off by the word progressive. To be progressive is to be an advocate for improvement. I like a progressive doctor, teacher, etc. I would like all the people I run into to be as current and even a head of the curve as possible. I

have not encountered the person who would like their doctor to prescribe a peg leg instead of a prosthetic limb. We would refuse treatment from a doctor who still practiced hemiglossectomy. The solution for stuttering was once cutting off half the tongue. It never worked and patients often died but it was a prescribed practice for 20 years. I could continue but it is embarrassing the things we once did in the name of medicine, the reason we no longer do it is called progress. We even, begin to doubt our doctor's credentials when we walk in and are greeted by a *Good Housekeeping* from 1997. Religious communities once stoned people, then we tried burning witches, then we read the scripture and heard "love one another" so we stopped that foolishness, and we call that progress. So, I don't have any hesitation with the word progressive when it comes to Christianity. It means to me advocating for improvements and leaving what is no longer applicable behind.

Now this is really not the opening to a memoir but I do have to do a bit of self-disclosure. My mother has had a great deal of influence on me. Especially in the area of faith. I did not know at the time, but would later come to understand that mother's view of scripture would have a profound effect on me. While I want bore you with all of the curriculum I will share a value or two I learned from her. Now bear in mind all of our parents could be wrong, even mine.

Mom, why aren't we more excited about our faith like the folks at the Assemblies of God. We don't raise our hands, it seems to me that we are just reading the songs and not praising the Lord.

Johnny can you look up something in the Bible. I think I once read it in Romans chapter 12.

I found what she was asking for and read, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Then mother quietly said, “It says it right here worship is when I present my body to God in service. When I hold babies in the nursery I worship, when I prepare Kool-Aid for VBS I worship. You want to worship God more, the church is going on two mission trips this summer, go on one.” Notice, the way she heard scripture, it was about how she should behave not about others. She did not even mention the people who raise their hands or worship differently, she simply said this is worship to me.

Mom, Mrs. Davis and Mr. Davis are getting a divorce and Stephanie says Mrs. Davis shouldn't be teaching us in Sunday School.

Johnny do you know where a Bible is? If you do can you look up Matthew 7:1
Judge Not lest ye be judged.

Don't judge Mr. and Mrs. Davis, being married is hard work and you have no idea. Don't judge Stephanie either for saying what she said, she's only repeating her mother. When you see either of the Davis's speak to them and call them Mr. or Mrs., that's really none of your business or my business.

Those are the two I like best but there are others--- but I'll stop there. Beyond the specific answer I learned from mother, what was valuable about the bible was how you applied it to **yourself**. It was to be read to improve yourself, that's a progressive reading of scripture. We listen to the scripture and reject our personal status quo to become the transformed disciple we are called to be. Instead of

scripture being a weapon to conform others to our standards it became a source of light to work out our salvation. **The Bible was not a weapon to inflict pain, scripture was given to provide a mirror to call us to improve our discipleship which is to be pro-GRESSIVE**

When I think of any brand of Christianity the first thing I notice is how they use scripture. I don't mean do they read it in worship, hold it high, what they believe about it, or how they describe it. What I mean is it a mirror or is it a weapon.

Where did we get the idea that we were to read scripture with others in mind, or use religion as a way to enforce our values (even if we did arrive at them by reading the scripture)? It probably goes back to preachers. Preachers are always thinking about how what I read is applied to you. I guess we figure you'd grow weary if every sermon was a reflection on our shortcomings or triumphs each week.

The Yale Preaching Lectures are named after this particular preacher from the 1700's. He was preparing to deliver the inaugural lectures that would one day bear his name. The manuscript was nicely folded away in his top coat, laying on his bed. He striped off his shirt to shave prior to the 7 o'clock lecture. He had developed the afternoon shadow and went to the bathroom to address it. He lathered up and stood in front of the mirror with his straight razor and began the ritual he had done for 30 years.

Something you need to know about this man, is that he had been involved in an affair. By this time he had broken it off, she returning to her husband and his wife not being any the wiser. It was indeed his secret. Several months had passed since

their last rendezvous and he was beginning to find his groove in the pulpit again. For his day, he was a popular preacher.

As he stood looking into the mirror, peeling away the soapy cream off his face, he began to see himself. Psalm 51, Luke 15, and other pieces of scripture began to crowd his mind. He became distracted and cut himself. All the men know what comes next, this flow of blood. He doctors it with the remedy of the day a piece of toilet paper. But then he cut himself again, and now the sink was a mixture of blood and water. He looked closely into the mirror and saw himself for what he was and he began to cry. He dropped the razer in the sink, and went and sat on the edge of the bed and began to weep.

To make a long story short, he tossed out his prepared remarks and his preaching that week was a mixture of weeping and confession. When we use scripture as a mirror we are too busy minding our own business to be involved with anyone else. Or as our savior put it---remove the 2x4 from your eye then you can see clear enough to remove the splinter from your neighbors. This is what is “stressed and held” in my soul, I read the Bible to see myself, not to apply it to my neighbor. I’m suppose to love my neighbor and transform myself, not LOVE MYSELF AND TRANSFORM MY NEIGHBOR.

I guess there is one more stop for our trip. I still “stress and hold” that sin needs to be addressed. Of course, in the spirt of what I said above I think I need to be worrying more about mine, than yours or anyone else’s. All Christians I am familiar with call out sin, conservative and liberal Christianity love to call out sin, they just point out different ones.

Some will argue the church must continue to be in the “shall not” business. At this point I need to remind us that did not work out well. God gave a list of 10 commandments, we couldn’t keep them. Prohibition did not work. It’s above my pay grade to explain why, it didn’t work then and it doesn’t work now. So as a pragmatic theologian I just want something that works.

Sin erodes the bonds we have with God and with each other, but telling everyone to stop, don’t, and quit appear to have a poor track record.

Let’s listen to Jesus

When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it wanders through waterless regions looking for a resting-place, but not finding any, it says, “I will return to my house from which I came.” ²⁵When it comes, it finds it swept and put in order. ²⁶Then it goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and live there; and the last state of that person is worse than the first.’

The spirit, the destructive sin leaves for a time. We are able to have discipline so we control our anger, control our sexual temptations, or whatever. We hold it in check for a while. But we did not fill the space with anything, we just cleansed it. Eventually our will breaks and the spirit returns and it is even worse this time than before.

So instead of focusing on the sin I “stress and hold” that we focus on the remedy. Put something in the place of sin, do the loving thing, which oddly enough brings us back to Micah.

Micah does not prohibit, he doesn’t say stop being mean, or thou shalt not treat others un-justly, instead in a powerful, pro-active way he says---do something.

Fill the space with something contrary to sin. Be constructive not self-destructive.

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

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Not one prohibition, not one mention of sin, but three concrete actions to busy ourselves with. It’s almost like the more we concentrate of justice, kindness, and humility the further we remove ourselves from destructive sin.

So I rambled this morning, from scripture to points to story and now to a conclusion. This is my faith, I am a Christian, if you need more specificity then say I am a Micah type of Jesus follower. After 36 years of reading the Bible I have concluded it is a light for MY PATH. It is a mirror for me to comb my faith and brush my spirit.