

**Good Politics ~ The BE Campaign**  
**BE Good ~ BE Just ~ BE Merciful ~ BE Humble**

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. ~ Micah 6:8*

Week 1 ~ BE Good

As you can gather from the verse above, Micah 6:8 will form the outline and framework for this short series.

Unlike recent series that we have done, with the study guide for this series I'm going to intersperse discussion questions as we go, and not save them for the end. But like all the series we've done, there will likely be more questions than you can possibly get through in a typical Table Group gathering, so simply pick the ones you think will work well with your group (or allow them to be fodder for you to come up with your own discussion questions) Questions will be marked by bullet points, italics, and color. Allow me to throw in a couple now...

- *When you think of “politics” what comes to mind? What feelings does it evoke?*
- *What sort of topics, issues, concerns would you put into the category of “politics”?*

Now, in order to be good students of the Bible, we want to be very careful about pulling one verse out of context. Though there are some verses that can “stand alone”, if you will, and we'd understand the basic meaning of it pretty accurately, it is nevertheless a good practice to understand the greater context a verse or passage comes from. With that in mind, below is a link to an overview of Micah produced by the Bible Project (who, you know by now, I really like and respect...plus, Meg wouldn't know what to do with herself if I didn't include something from the Bible Project 😊) As you watch the video, take note of how much Micah addresses “political” issues.

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/micah/>

- *If you watched the video, what “political” issues were addressed?*

*“He has SHOWN you...”, “...and what does the Lord REQUIRE of you?”*

These two statements tell us something very important about God. YHWH is a God who communicates, who reveals Himself and His will. We are not left guessing what God is like or what He expects. Theologically, the Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are based on God's revelation. Scripture is considered the recording of that revelation. Or to say it another way, what we know of God, we know through His revealing Himself. God takes the initiative in being known, and invites us to respond. We know God, or anyone else for that matter, through revelation.

For example, I know a lot ABOUT Michael Jordan...but I don't know Michael Jordan. (And He certainly doesn't know me...or even that I exist.) Or, when I first met my wife, Angela, I could observe some things about her (she's pretty and funny). And those observations were true. But did I really "know" her? In order to really get to know her required numerous conversations through which she revealed more and more about herself (beyond basic "facts", to her thoughts and feelings, likes and dislikes, hopes, fears, dreams, aspirations, etc.)

Likewise, God wants to be known, and has made Himself known. (His fullest revelation to date is through His Son Jesus.) But with knowledge comes responsibility and accountability. Or, to say it another way, we can't feign ignorance.

When I was a teenager, and especially after I was old enough to drive, whenever I would leave the house, my parents would say, "*Be good.*" (Sort of their way of saying "*Make good decisions.*") And because they had raised me I understood what they meant. Loaded into those two little words "Be good" were such things as: Don't drink or do drugs; don't race cars or drive recklessly; don't get anyone pregnant; respect the law and don't get yourself arrested—basically, don't hurt yourself or others by doing something stupid/foolish. The point is, because I had a relationship with my parents, I understood the expectations they had.

Similarly, Micah was reminding the Israelites of their relationship with God...their unique, special, covenant relationship with God. It was what made them who they were. Going back all the way to Abraham, continuing through Isaac and Jacob, formalized with Moses and the giving of the Law. The Israelites knew what God expected from them. It was a part of their history and their identity. It was rehearsed annually with their great holidays and feasts, weekly with the Sabbath, and daily through their prayers. "*He has shown you...what is good...*" was an undeniably accurate statement. Therefore they should have no problem being able to answer the question, "*And what does the Lord require of you?*" Just as I may not have always obeyed my parents, there was no denying that I knew what was expected. The same holds true for Israel in regards to God.

- *Reflecting on your childhood and teenage years, what "rules" or expectations that were placed upon you did you disagree with as being "good" for you? What rules/expectations can you now look back on and see the goodness and wisdom in them?*

Let's drill down a little bit on this word and idea of "good". What is "good" or "goodness"? Good/goodness is the Hebrew word "tov" which appears in the Old Testament well over 500 times. Its Greek counterpart "kalos" occurs over 100 times in the New Testament. The point is that good/goodness is a major Biblical theme, and the source and standard of what is good/goodness is God.

For example, a common refrain throughout the Old Testament is "*Give thanks to the Lord, FOR HE IS GOOD, His love endures forever.*" (emphasis added; see I Chronicles 16:34, II Chronicles 7:3, Psalm 100:5, Psalm 106:1, Psalm 107:1, Psalms 118:1...just to name a few.) Additionally, in a

very interesting exchange between God and Moses in Exodus 33-34, we read that Moses requested of God, “*Show me Your glory.*” (Exodus 33:18). And this was God’s response...

*“I will cause My GOODNESS to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim My name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. But you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live... Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed His name, the Lord. And He passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” (Exodus 33:19-20; 34:5-7a, emphasis added). Notice that God’s presence is equated to God’s goodness.*

- *How do you determine what is “good”? Or, what does it take for you to identify something as “good”? (Be it a “good” person, a “good” action, a “good” policy, a “good” attitude. Etc.) Or, how do you tend to use or apply the word “good”?*

Because God is the source and standard of all that is good, then it stands to reason that in order for something to be considered good it needs to come from God, or needs to conform to God, or be consistent with God, or be deemed good by God. In other words, you and I are not the best judges of what is or isn’t good...at least, not without first learning from God what is good/goodness. This is the beauty and genius of Scripture...it teaches us what God considers good.

Interestingly, on the very first page of the Bible we see God survey all that He created and considered it “good”. Seven times, poetically corresponding to the seven days of creation, the word “tov” (good) is used. By extension we can say life is good. Furthermore, God’s laws, statutes, judgements are considered “tov” (good)...see Psalm 119. Again, whatever comes from God is good, and Scripture is a record of what has emanated from God.

Imagine a baseball umpire (Pastor Matt, our resident baseball fan/coach/player will appreciate this illustration 😊) A good umpire needs to know the strike zone, and accurately and consistently call balls and strikes. But what happens if an umpire just arbitrarily calls balls and strikes based on whatever they want the strike zone to be? Chaos ensues and the beautiful game of baseball falls apart.

In the very last sentence of the book of Judges in the Old Testament we read, “*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*” (Judges 21:25, emphasis added) In other words, those were dark and chaotic times when no one lived according to an agreed upon standard. Ironically, this was the same nation that had agreed to a covenant with God, a large portion of which dictated how they would live together. (For Israel, the Mosaic Covenant—aka The Law— also functioned as a constitution of sorts). In order for a people to live together well, to thrive and flourish, there needs to be something that unifies them, as well as standards of behavior and order that they live by. (Categorically, this is called “politics”.)

(\*\*\*At this juncture it is probably good (no pun intended) to state the working definition of “politics” we are using in this series: *Politics is the process by which people come together to create and maintain communities, institutions, and societies that are capable of achieving common goals.* Our minds tend to immediately jump to government, and perhaps American partisan politics, when we think of “politics”. But let’s not limit our thinking and imagination to just that. Politics are at play in families, businesses, churches, organizations of all types...anywhere people are trying to function together.\*\*\*)

- *What sort of things do you think humans need to agree upon in order for us to live together well? What do you think it would take in order to have such an agreement?*

Back to the opening pages of the Bible, Genesis chapter 2 to be precise, we see that in the Garden of Eden there were two trees: the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And, of course, the first humans were told to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good (tov) and Evil. The point of the two trees is illustrative of the entire Scriptural story, and really human history as a whole: Will we (humans) trust God, especially as the source and standard of what is Good, or will we determine good and evil for ourselves? History demonstrates that, by and large, we tend toward the latter. In so doing, “*might makes right*” has been the basic mode of operation for human systems (families to civilizations) from antiquity through today.

Again, how humans get along with one another, how we order our lives together, is the foundation of what we call “politics”. But if everyone does as they see fit in their own eyes, or if whoever can gain and exert power gets to make the rules, will that produce good results? Like it or not, “politics” is unavoidable. But can it be “good”? Or is there a way to approach politics that is good for us, and that represents the goodness God wants for us and represents the good God who made us?

I would say the answer to that question is, “*Yes, but...*”

Yes, we can approach politics in a good way, and in a way that reflects God and His goodness. (I say that with confidence because God has shown us what is good.)

BUT, does that mean everything will work out pleasantly, or as we want them to, or as we hope? Nope. Why? Because as long as free will exists, there will always exist the option for people to choose to determine good and evil on their own, to choose not to trust God. The basic choice between the fruit of two trees remains. This is a reality we need to come to grips with. As much as we may want good for others, and do good for others, there’s no guarantee that they will do the same. But this is not an excuse for us to not do good or be good.

Our focus needs to be on faithfully and consistently pursuing good/goodness, as defined by God, and trusting God with the results. This reminds me of a short video that offers some perspective. Here’s the link...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucO8xww-Iao>

Quick review: God has shown us, revealed to us, what is good. We are not ignorant or unaware. And yet, individually and collectively, we seem to have trouble consistently being/doing good.

God has also shown us, revealed to us, something very crucial about our nature and our identity. As humans we are inherently spiritual AND political creatures. God made us this way, and this truth is reflected in the two greatest commandments:

- Love God—that’s a spiritual command because it has to do with relating to an immaterial, spiritual Being.
- Love Neighbor—that’s a political command because the moment there is another person or other in the equation things become political.

With these chief commands, both of our essential dimensions are addressed, and point us in the direction of what is Good...LOVE.

- *What do you think and feel about being both a spiritual AND political creature? What are the challenges that come with both of those dimensions of our personhood?*

An interesting feature of humans is that we like to think of ourselves as good. Individually and collectively (whatever collective we happen to be in), we intrinsically consider ourselves the “good ones”. The “bad ones” are that person or those people...certainly not me or us.

This starts to touch upon week 4 of this series (BE Humble), so we’ll save that for later, but when we think of ourselves as political creatures (which we are) we do need to have clarity on who WE are, or of whom we’re speaking of when we say WE/US.

This leads us to questions/issues of Identity. Much like the option of trusting God to define good and evil for us versus defining good and evil for ourselves, we also have the option to allow God to define our identity or to determine our own identity. This plays out both on an individual and collective level—how we understand ourselves personally, but also as part of a group or groups, and how we relate to other individuals and other groups.

At this point I find it helpful to differentiate between what defines us and what affects us. I’ll use myself as an example...(you could do the same using yourself)

I am...

- White
- Male
- Heterosexual
- American
- Middleclass
- Educated
- A father and husband
- A minister

(I could probably keep on going, but this will suffice.)

Which of these is my “identity” (i.e. which of these defines me)? I would say, none of them define me, but they all affect me...how I perceive myself, others, and the world around me, and how I interface with it all. Notice what I didn’t include on that list.

I am...

- A Christian/Follower of Jesus

That defines me! That's my identity! And that is what orders and shapes everything else. And what is particularly important is that's also what defines which group I belong to or identify with above all else. And Jesus dictates for me what is important and how I am to interact with others...both those in my "tribe" and those outside it...and that's with LOVE. Jesus goes as far as to say that I am to love those who hate me/my enemies.

For the sake of example and comparison, let's say instead that my identity, or what defines me, was that I'm an American. What changes? Well, pretty much everything, because when identity changes so does vision and values. Because America is not (never has been and never will be) the Kingdom of God, the vision and values of the United States is different from the vision and values of God's Kingdom. If "American" is my identity, then how I view and interact with non-Americans changes. But if "follower of Jesus and a citizen of the Kingdom of God" is my identity, I have no reason to view people from other countries as a threat or competitor. Do you see how that difference plays out? Or, if my primary identity was as a white person, how do I respond when the country I live in goes from being majority white in population to white being a minority? What feelings or fears does that potentially unearth? But since Christian is my primary identity/definer, I have no negative reaction to such a population change. In fact, I see it as a Kingdom opportunity. Again, do you see how identity affects things?

"Good" politics, or in order to approach/engage in politics well, requires us to receive, understand, and embrace our God-given identity and all that comes with that...how it affects our vision and values. If we define our own identity, our involvement in politics (on any level...familial to societal) will not be "good"...because God is the source and standard of what is good. Or to say all of that a different way, but consistent to the series we just finished on the Sermon on the Mount, we need to view all politics from a Kingdom perspective and with Kingdom priorities.

- *As you think of the role your faith has in your life, is it your primary identity...what defines and shapes you? Or is it just one of many things that affects you? Explain. (This is a similar question to whether our faith is our operating system or an app.)*

Before I conclude this week I think it's important to clear up a misconception that, sadly, many Christians in America hold...actually it's a rather major theological and hermeneutical mistake that Christians in America seem highly susceptible to. And that is to misunderstand the promises and blessings offered to Israel in Scripture as somehow applying to the United States. Let me be as clear and direct as possible: **THEY DO NOT APPLY TO THE UNITED STATES!!!** You and I are not party to the Mosaic Covenant, from which those promises and blessings come. (Incidentally, there are corresponding curses spelled out for disobedience...just FYI.) It is sheer American Exceptionalism and hubris to even attempt such a misguided leap. (Though, to be fair, Americans are not the only ones to have tried it.) And, again, this is the danger of not properly

understanding our Identity. (Hint: if you find yourself bristling at critiques of America, that may be a signal that your identity may be more wrapped up in being an American than you realize.)

Over the past couple of years we have discussed the important role of narratives. Identity is rooted in a narrative. Sometimes different narratives get mashed together or conflated. Part of what makes American Exceptionalism so powerful (and so dangerous) is that it has gotten linked to the Scriptural narrative. God had a very special role for Israel to play in His plan of redemption of the world. American mythology likes to take on that kind of specialness for America's role in the world...as if it's God ordained, God sanctioned. This is an example of conflating narratives...and when narratives get conflated it has an effect on how people view their identity. "Good" politics requires us to have a clear grasp of our story so we can have a clear understanding of our identity.

- *What are some ways you've observed the Scriptural narrative and the American narrative conflated? Why do you think there is such a temptation to do so? What dangers or concerns arise from such conflation?*

I realize that we're using a verse from an Israelite prophet from the Old Testament, who was speaking directly to Israel and Judah, as our anchor for this series. So it's important to understand HOW we, as 21st century Christians are to use a passage like this properly. As Old Testament scholar Dr. John Walton says, "*The Bible was not written to us, but it was written for us.*" The good gift of the Hebrew Scriptures is that they give us the narrative of God's activity in creation and redemption of HIS good world. They offer us perspective, principles, and precedence that we can learn from. Through them we see what God is like and what His priorities are. Through them God shows us what is good, and what He requires of us...even though we have to look at them through the lens of further revelation given to us through Christ and the New Covenant.

P.S. In Emily Post's classic book *Etiquette*, she says that there are two things we should avoid talking about in public: Religion and Politics. Well, sorry Emily, I beg to differ. I'm more in the G.K. Chesterton camp, who said, "*I never discuss anything else except politics and religion. There is nothing else to discuss...*"

Sharing thoughts, feelings, and beliefs on religion and politics is how we get to truly know people and allow them to know us. Otherwise, relationships stay rather shallow and superficial. Yes, there are dangers in knowing one another deeply—namely the fear of rejection—but relationships are worth the risk.

So as we enter this season of "Good Politics" let's make a commitment to one another. When we have disagreements (not IF but WHEN...because we will)...let's assume the best of one another. Sadly, it has become acceptable, even normal, to assume that people who disagree with us must be either stupid or evil. Such a posture lacks both humility and love...which are quintessential Christian qualities and characteristics. So when someone in our Table Group or congregation disagrees with us, instead of vilifying that person, let's be curious. Let's get to know how that person came to the conclusion or opinion that they have. (There's a story there...let's discover

it.) Let's value and respect them as fellow image-bearers of God navigating the journey of life with us. When our opinions are disagreed with or challenged, let's not get angry, but be open to reexamine our position. What we'll likely discover is that fear plays a much bigger role in our opinions/positions than we know. (A response of anger is typically a signal of underlying fear.) Let's allow love to overcome our fears. Let's allow humility to open us up to the possibility of changing our hearts/minds on some things. This, my friends, is Good Politics.

- *What is a position or opinion you've changed your mind about? What brought about that change?*
- *Here's a potential exercise to try as a Table Group: Have each person identify the political issues that are important to them as they consider voting (perhaps their top 3 issues) BUT, have them share in such a way that they don't identify what side of the issue they are on. (For example, I might say immigration, foreign policy, and government spending. BUT I won't share my specific opinions on those issues...just that these are key issues that I pay attention to.) Later on in the series, perhaps, we'll slowly reveal our opinions/sides on issues and why they are important to us...but for now, just which issues are priorities to us. (\*\*\*)Leaders, if you don't feel you or your group can do this without causing tension amongst your group, then just avoid this exercise. (\*\*\*)*

### Soul Training Exercise ~ Noticing the Good & Giving Thanks

In James 1:17-18 we read, *"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all He created."*

God is the source and standard of all that is Good. (Perhaps you've noticed that I've been stressing that.)

With that in mind, the invitation this week is pretty simple. Spend a little time each day noticing and reflecting upon what is Good in your life...and offer up thanks to God for that good. The goal is to train ourselves to notice the Presence and activity of God in our lives and all around us...which is always GOOD.