



God's Code of Conduct

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I've had the privilege of being part of two professions which both have codes of ethics -- nursing and the US Army. Stated codes of ethics and conduct provide external guidance which set boundaries for our actions and guide us in making the right decision in difficult situations. As my resident ethicist -- my husband, Chaplain Ron Huggler -- says, ethics is about doing good.

As Christians, God's "code of conduct" -- His ethical code -- guides us. Micah 6:8 states, "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."

In the five chapters before this, Micah -- as a prophet of God -- had already spoken a clear message of the judgment that was coming upon both Israel and Judah. The tone of his prophesying changes with chapter 6. In verses 1-2, Micah pleaded with the people to hear God, and then the voice shifts in verses 3-5 to God speaking in the first person, justifying how He has loved and cared for His people through all their history.

By verse 6, Micah can't keep quiet any longer. He says to God (paraphrased): "What can I bring to You, God, to make up for the effrontery of this people...for my own failure? Worship? Burnt offerings? Yearling calves? Maybe 10,000 rams...in 10,000 rivers of oil? Not enough? Maybe my firstborn? What would be enough, Lord?"

And then God reminds Micah of something which he states in verse 8 (again I paraphrase): "He (God/Jehovah/Adonai) has (already) told you/us what is good/right/and proper to honor Him. God rightly requires of us to do justly, show justice, live rightly with others and to love and diligently practice and faithfully demonstrate mercy, kindness, compassion and to walk humbly thru life with others and in humility and obedience before God (Elohim)." (Editorial comment: This verse has been selected as the theme verse for the ACCTS Ethics Initiative.)

Two different names for God are used in the passage -- *Jehovah/Adonai* and *Elohim*. *Jehovah/Adonai* is often written in the Bible as LORD (all in capital letters). This name for God indicates His position in our lives as Lord and Master. This name shows that He is our ultimate authority -- the One who should be revered and obeyed, and the One who has the right to request our obedience. When God calls Himself *Adonai/Jehovah*, He is defining the relationship between God and humans.

The second name for God that Micah uses at the end verse 8 is *Elohim*. God uses this name to describe Himself as God the Creator, the God of All Gods, the Almighty God, and the Self-existent One. This was the name God used when He introduced Himself to Moses as "I AM WHO I AM."

Why did God choose to use two different names for Himself? Perhaps He used *Elohim* to remind the Jewish nation that, as created beings, they were made in the image of God and needed to bear that image well and that day-to-day image bearing looks much more like living out Micah 6:8 than elaborate or abundant sacrifices.

The use of both names certainly invokes God's deserved authority over Israel and shows both His right and prerogative to ask -- and even command -- that they "do good" and to define what "doing good" looked like.

There is also a focus shift in the passage, from the man-centered focus in verses 6-7 (“What must I do to honor this God?”) to God’s answer to Micah’s question in verse 8 (“He has told you...”). Ron and I have a commander friend who says that, when faced with a problem, we often ask the wrong first question. Often that first question is “What should I do?” when there are at least two better questions that should be asked first: “Will I do the right thing when I know what it is?” and “What is the right thing to do?” Asking “What should I do?” limits our thinking to what is easy or expedient for us. It is one way of asking, “What is the fastest way out of this for me?” rather than asking, “What is the right thing to do, even if it is more costly or difficult?” Micah only got to the “right answer” to his question about honoring God when his focus shifted from finding the answer within himself to remembering God’s answer to the question.

The verbs in this passage are all active -- do, love in action, faithfully demonstrate, and walk. This isn’t a “think nice thoughts and consider that enough” kind of verse. These verses direct us to consider our ways and change them to conform to God’s definition of good for us in each situation we find ourselves. This requires a spiritual openness to both the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, to allow Him to be new and fresh in our lives and to lead us to change.

Ron often says that the word “good” is God’s greatest superlative. Each day of creation was capped off with God’s comment that “it was good.” God also uses that word in the best evaluation any of us will ever hear: “Well done, good and faithful servant.” God is showing Micah (and us) His best answer for us.

Micah 6:8 has the appearance of being a simple verse, much like the Beatitudes appear at first reading. The verse in Micah reads gently. It has no fire and brimstone in it. But living it out is much harder than it would seem at first read. What is just? What do I do when what is just for one person may be unjust for another? How do I discover the good that God desires in each situation? To love mercy, when mercy means withholding rightly deserved punishment, means choosing responses to others that walk out the careful balances of speaking the truth in love and honoring the image of God that we are all made with. This is not easy when our feelings are wounded or our sense of what is right has been challenged. Walking humbly with God and others requires that we hold ourselves as fallible -- not perfect, and willing to learn and change. Again, what at first glance appears to be a “soft” Bible verse instead challenges us to live lives of personal strength and integrity. It takes courage to find out what God sees as “good” in difficult circumstances -- and then, having found it, to stand strong in His good.

The ethical challenges particular to the practice of medicine and nursing are many. The easily seen ones are those related to health care professionals being asked to violate their own moral values and consciences in order to provide care. These include pharmacists being told to provide RU-486, the “abortion pill”; medical students being required to participate in abortions as a routine part of their medical training; and psychiatrists and counselors being required to provide counsel to clients in opposition to the psychiatrist or counselor’s own closely held religious beliefs.

Other medical-related ethical issues center around money -- what issues in medicine get money for research studies? And what types of subjects are studied? For instance, most of the major research work on heart attacks were studies of men. Only now are researchers discovering that heart attacks in women can look very different than they do in men, and this is an ethical issue.

A more subtle ethical challenge looks like senior nurses providing no leadership, help, or support to junior nurses as they struggle with providing care to an obviously pregnant patient who was having an abortion in a military hospital. Instead of recognizing the need for each caregiver to work through the ethical challenge that

this created, the senior leadership said and did nothing. This sense of “the abnormal should now be seen as normal” pervades US culture and creates even more ethical challenges.

How do we recover from a breach of own failure in ethical decision-making? Remember that Micah 6:8 talks about humility -- and that means leaving room to find out that we are sometimes wrong. As a nurse I thought I had worked out God’s perspective on sharing my faith with my patients. Patients are, after all, in vulnerable position when they are ill. Nurses do indeed control their pain medication! We call health care facilities “institutions” because of the dependency and vulnerability of the residents, requiring greater protection of the patients’ rights by those responsible for their care. I had come to the decision that it was wrong for me to share my faith with patients, since they had not come to the hospital or to me to find spiritual help -- they had come for medical help! And then God spoke...

I was working in an intensive care unit (ICU). A patient on a ventilator had been transferred from the ICU next door so I did not know her at all, and she wasn’t my patient. During that shift, as clearly as God speaks to me, He told me to go pray with her. And oh, how I argued with Him! “You know I don’t do that” and “That’s not right for me to do” and even “She’s not my patient.” At the end of the shift, I went home without praying with her. I had a restless night with God and committed that I would pray with her when I went to work the next day. But the next day, she wasn’t there -- she had died during the night. My heart was in anguish that I had failed someone who was so close to meeting God face to face. Finding out from a colleague that the patient was a Christian gave me little comfort. I had denied a sister in Christ the comfort of fellowship and prayer as she lay dying. That day my “ethical framework” changed on this issue. I called my behavior what God would call it -- disobedience and sin. I asked forgiveness and accepted His forgiveness and restoration. From then on, I listened for God’s whisper as I interacted with my patients and I chose to obey it. I also listened better to my patients -- when they spoke about a spiritual need, I chose to step toward it, offering to pray for and with them. I began to use “I’m one of those praying people. Can I pray for you about that?” as my mantra at work. And I tell this story without shame or fear, because I WAS wrong -- and humility means the ability to accept correction and to accept God’s forgiveness and restoration.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Does your military or police force have an established code of conduct for personnel to follow?
2. We are called to bear the image of Christ to our world. How can you do this on a daily basis – in your career, in your home life, and in other areas of your life?
3. Humility is a characteristic Christians must have, yet our human nature makes this hard at times. What helps you remain humble with others, even if you are in a position of authority over them?
4. How can armed forces personnel show mercy while dispensing justice? Have you been in, or seen, examples of people who did both of those things well?

Conversational Prayer: Spend time in conversational prayer, using your own words and speaking to Christ as not only as your Redeemer, but your friend. Ask Him which lessons from this devotional you most need to learn and apply in your own life.

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