**THE THREE Gs**

**G**oodness, **G**reatness and **G**od

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

January 29, 2017

4th Sunday After Epiphany

4th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Micah 6:1-8

Psalm 15

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Matthew 5:1-12

If you want to kill the word, “humility,” you only need to say, “Let me tell you about my humility and how I obtained it.” Instantly we have destroyed the very essence of the word. Well there are times we have seen humility in action in the life of someone of power and influence, who takes on the responsibility of the mundane. This shouldn’t be surprising because it is one of the basic teachings of scripture, a teaching that has been creeping out of touch with current evolving values in our contemporary culture.

Surely you have considered this great verse from Micah that many of us memorized in our youth: “God has told you, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” We would be in trouble if we put this verse up for a vote today. Who wants to walk humbly?

Or take this verse from the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” If you try being meek in today’s world, you will pay a price.

Or how about this passage from I Corinthians? “. . . but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong . . . God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are, that no one should boast before God.”

Sometimes we can’t distinguish between what is good and right because we don’t have all the background, don’t have the big picture. We jump to judgment and determine that things are foolish before they can be examined under the wisdom of God.

Consider the plight of a poor farmer, Fred Thomas from Alabama. He found himself in court, all bandaged, with a cast on one arm and another on his right leg. His head was bandaged, too. It was obviously an insurance case.

Before the hearing the judge asked him how he felt. “Judge, I really don't think I'm going to make it. The hospital says that this is serious."

With his Judge Joe Brown like authority the judge offered his opinion, "I don't understand that. The accident report I have in front of me says that when Trooper Lee asked how you felt after the accident, you said you felt fine."

"Well judge, it was like this," said Fred. "My little rig was struck by a big trailer that jack-knifed and knocked me into the ditch. When I came to, I saw Trooper Lee's blue light going around and around. He walked down to where my pick-up truck was in the ditch. I was carting my old mule, poor old Pepper, to a neighbor's down the road. The pick-up had hurt her bad and landed on top of her and Trooper Lee just looked on and shook his head. Then he pulled out his pistol and shot her to put her out of her misery. Then he came over to me with his gun smoking and said, 'How do you feel?' and I said, 'I feel just fine.'"

When things seem to be out of place, and unjust, it is hard for us not to feel that the values we hold dear are being moved. Private debating with ourselves and philosophizing easily dwindle into anger which when unrecognized can be redirected toward God. It is then that we begin to wish for a return to a life that was more simple and more easily understood.

Do you remember Jim Collins' 2001 bestseller *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*? It highlighted 11 companies that had gone from good to great. So, where are these companies 16 years later? Many of them are not so great. Some of them aren't even good. And some don't even exist. I thought that it was dangerous but important to consider this and bring it to our attention because one of our Bible passages this morning seems to take a very different approach. It appears rather than seeking to go from good to great, God suggests moving from great to good.    
  
In 2001, business and leadership writer Jim Collins wrote the bestselling book *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. When I moved to Pittsford it was all the rage. That summer while walking on the beach in Avalon, NJ it seemed as though everyone was reading this book. I watched a new stack of them disappear almost overnight at the Paper Peddler, a small local bookstore that I miss. If you wanted to know what was happening in the news, there was no better place to find the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the *New York Times*, or the *Atlantic City Press*. Even the owner of the *Inquirer* who vacationed on the island, would stop by, pick up a fresh copy of the paper he owned from the floor and put down his dollar on the counter. But, of course, here was the place where the true summer residents would scour the supply for the best beach reads and Collins book was the hit in 2001.

Collins conducted research on 11 companies that had "made the leap" and in his book he chronicled why "good is the enemy of great.” Business leaders and yes, we ecclesiastical types gobbled up this analysis and we had some of our organizational leadership glean Collins’ ideas in order to move our companies and institutions toward "greatness." I had the idea of using his ideas for a church officer retreat here in Pittsford. We were a good church, but we would ask our officers what we needed to do to make First Presbyterian Church a “great” church. Collins defined "greatness" as "distinctive impact" and "superior performance" shepherded by a "level five leader."[[1]](#footnote-1) This is where I feared we would run into problems since I read a little further to discover that I was not a level five pastor.  
  
It's no wonder the book was so popular. Americans love greatness. It's no coincidence that a major slogan of speeches that have been heard by crowds and slithered into our national consciousness has been, “Make America Great Again." We have been tempted to adopt that language in the church as well. We often think that the measure of a congregation or religious fellowship’s greatness is in how "distinctive" its impact might be and we laud "superior performance" in all the metrics that business organizations measure: bigger, faster, stronger, richer, and more famous.  
  
The idea, then, is that if you're not yet great, you have work to do.   
  
The problem, however, is that greatness isn't easy to sustain. Of the 11 "great" companies that Collins profiled in his wildly popular book, most are not so great a decade and a half later:   
  
⧫ Circuit City, one of the most successful companies profiled in the book, went out of business in 2009, buried by competition from Best Buy and online retailers.  
  
⧫ Fannie Mae (the Federal National Mortgage Association) had to be bailed out by the government during the mortgage crisis, and is seen by many as contributing to the cause of the crisis in the first place.   
  
⧫ Pitney Bowes was half its 2001 market cap in 2012.   
  
⧫ Five of the companies (Abbott Labs, Kimberly-Clark, Kroger, Walgreens and Wells Fargo) have done okay but with only very modest if not meager market gains and there is at least one on this list that has had to face serious questions about honesty in a push for greatness.  
  
⧫ One of the companies (Gillette) was sold.  
  
⧫ Only Nucor (a steel producer) and Philip Morris (the tobacco producer) have remained "great" according to Collins' criteria.[[2]](#footnote-2)   
  
It would be easy to scoff in hindsight at Collins' research. But much advertising and many books enticing us to explore them from their displays at Barnes and Noble illustrate the principle that past results do not always predict future performance.   
  
I think that this should raise a question for us. *Is greatness really the best goal for a person, a church, a business, or a nation?* The prophet Micah didn't seem to think so. When we turn to the Scriptures, one of the things we realize is that greatness is vastly overrated.  You can look at Herod the Great but we would not necessarily call him “good.”  
  
In fact, rather than good being the enemy of the great, biblically speaking, *greatness is the enemy of goodness*.  I am not suggesting that we should not do things with excellence, but that greatness is a misplaced goal.    
  
**Things were not so great in Micah's day**   
  
Micah wrote to the nation of Judah during a time when the nation was under the thumb of the Assyrian Empire. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been swallowed up by the Assyrians in 722 B.C., and Jerusalem itself was saved only because its king, Hezekiah, paid off the invaders. The people would have remembered when they were once a great nation, and may have wondered how to get that back again.[[3]](#footnote-3)   
  
Indeed, that's one of the overarching themes of Micah. It recalls Genesis 12, where God promised Abraham that his offspring would become a "great" nation through whom all the nations of the world would be blessed.   
  
Greatness is contingent upon consistency over time, and Israel demonstrated that it could not sustain that greatness. The kingdom that had reached its height of greatness during the days of David and Solomon and, at the time of Micah, was now a shadow of its former self, divided and conquered. Micah chronicles how the nation had gone off the rails with oppression of the poor, corruption in its courts, dishonest economic practices, false prophets, greedy priests, loss of order and, most tellingly, a rejection of God's justice and God's commandments.   
  
Notice the first five verses of chapter 6. It's a slide show of the past. God brought them out of slavery in Egypt. God delivered them from their enemies. Yet, they rejected the very One who saved them. How could they possibly be blessed, let alone a blessing to the nations? They were no longer great and no longer good, either.   
  
Through this prophet, God delivered judgment on the nation, but, as always with God in the prophetic literature, that judgment is also tempered with hope. God told the people that they will be restored. But how will that happen?   
  
Well, we learn first that they will not be achieving greatness through strict religious practices. "*With what shall I come before the LORD and bow myself before God on high?*" asks the prophet (v. 6). "*Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Should I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*" (v. 7). These are all ridiculously expensive sacrifices -- about as good a religious performance metric as an Israelite could imagine. This was great sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins on a grand scale. But was that superior religious performance the thing that God really desired of them then? Is it what God wants from us now?  
  
Ruminate on this forward for the Christian church today. We might also ask, "With what shall we come before the Lord? With our great buildings, our filled seats, our million-dollar budgets? Will God be pleased if we show him that we're successful? Is bigger, better, faster, and stronger the sign of the kind of church God requires and blesses? The kind of nation God blesses? Is greatness what God seeks from us?"   
  
Micah says, “No.” Notice how he fashions his conception of God’s expectation when he says (v. 8): "*He has told you, O mortal, what is****good****.*" [emphasis added] What does the Lord desire? Goodness, not greatness! It's been God's desire all along, from the very first moments of creation, when God saw everything and called it “*good*.”[[4]](#footnote-4)  
  
What does such goodness look like? How do we measure it?   
  
First the prophet said that goodness begins with doing justice (v. 8). The Hebrew word *mispat* refers to God's order for all of life. To "do justice," in other words, means that we order all of our lives, including our interactions with others, in accordance with God's will.   
  
The first aspect of goodness is thus*a recognition that we have little goodness of our own*. God is the one who sets the standard of goodness, and nothing we say or do can be good if it is not said or done according to God’s intention from the beginning. According to Rev. Kurt Tomlinson of Lebanon UMC in Lebanon, Ohio, "Goodness is something that is all of God, whereas 'greatness' is what we humans attempt." When we "do justice" it's a recognition that goodness is defined by what God wills and empowers, and not by what we want or desire.   
  
Micah builds on his progressive requirement that begins with "justice" by saying that *true goodness is also the result of loving "kindness"*(v. 8). The Hebrew word *hesed* is sometimes translated as "kindness" or "mercy," but it is primarily a word connected with covenant faithfulness to God and to others. The word is often used to convey God's "steadfast," faithful love for God’s people, as in Psalm 118. Being good means that we maintain faithfulness to God in all things and demonstrate that faithfulness by our steadfast love for God and for all God's people.   
  
Here's how that works. Sin is primarily about breaking covenant with God. Israel had broken her covenant with God in favor of seeking greatness on her own. But seeking to be “great” can strip of the idea of being good. In pursuit of greatness, goodness can be set aside it then becomes the enemy of good. God requires *faithfulness*, not just intellectual expressions of faith. Faithfulness looks more like following than thinking. We remember the covenant God makes with us in our baptism and we live it out day to day in all that we say and do. We are called to love such faithfulness and carry it out in community with God and each other. God is not all that impressed if we say, “But we have an alternative text, Lord!”  
  
Micah says, *being good means walking humbly with our God* (v. 8). The Hebrew word *hasenea* means more than simple modesty and humility, however. It implies attentiveness, or paying attention to God. The people are to watch God for what is good and not do their own thing and call that good.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*

Now, as I thought about this text, I wanted to avoid the political conversation that has gripped this nation. There has been too much name calling, finger pointing, scapegoating, blaming, shaming, and denying that has taken root. It has divided families. It divides churches and communities. This is not good. We don’t know which news sources to believe or trust. Our social media presents things to us in a way that is so filtered through opinions that we can’t tell what is truth. Often humility, kindness and justice go wanting.

Patrick Connelly is a fan of country star Blake Shelton. In fact, Connelly was fortunate enough to attend a Blake Shelton concert in Overland Park, Kansas. Unfortunately, Connelly was confined to a wheelchair. All he could see at the concert was a sea of people. Then the most amazing thing happened. Without being asked, two strangers hoisted Connelly aloft on their shoulders and they held him there for almost half an hour in grueling 100-degree heat, long enough for this disabled veteran to watch his hero perform. That’s kindness. To be kind is the least we can do in this unkind world.

Of course, the Bible places no limits on our kindness. We are even to be kind to those who are unkind to us. Exodus 23:5 requires the children of Israel not to oppress strangers – with the remind that they were once strangers themselves. That kind of Biblical background challenges our fear and has some of us wondering what our response should be when we see the TV images from last night of an Orthodox Christian Syrian family who had landed in Philadelphia after years of obtaining the correct paper work to obtain a visa to come here.[[6]](#footnote-6) There they were, being denied the opportunity they had been promised and their choice was to take what money they had saved and pay the airline for return tickets or face detention and possible deportation. They chose the first. Kindness becomes messy when it pits our fear of terror against kindness and justice and sometimes it feels that this requirement from God in scripture just gets in the way and make us uncomfortable. Sometimes it is hard for leadership to foresee the unexpected consequences that may result from decisions.

Jesus, of course, went even farther than the Old Testament and said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you . . .”[[7]](#footnote-7) There are to be no limits placed upon our kindness. We are to pour out acts of love and generosity even toward persons that we may deem undeserving. Every time I come into this room, I am reminded of this when I look up at this stained-glass window and see depicted here the story of the Good Samaritan. Even yesterday, as I pondered what to say about this passage it hit me that scripture refers to him as the “Good Samaritan” and not the “Great Samaritan.”

For Christians, this is particularly significant because we believe that God poured out divine love on us when we were undeserving. Kindness is among the most basic requirements for the believer. Sometimes our acts of kindness meet with only cold ingratitude from the recipients of those acts. That is all right. It is our task to try and obey Jesus. Kindness is the first business of a follower of Jesus.

Justice seems to me to be the larger and more complicated concept to embrace than kindness. Kindness is often an individual act. I see a person in need and, like the Good Samaritan, I try to help. That is kindness. Years ago, Martha and I lived in Morrisville, Pennsylvania directly across the river from Trenton and every day I took Rte. 1 across a bridge that continued to have a toll. The toll was one dime. It seemed even then that it would have cost more to pay for toll takers than to make the bridge free, but cars queued to provide their ten cents. I usually kept several dimes and would say, “This is for me and these two other dimes are for my friends who are driving behind me.” It was the best entertainment you could get for ten cents, just watching in the rear-view mirror how the person in the toll booth would try and explain that the toll had already been paid by their friend ahead.

Yes, that is kindness, but justice on the other hand is the passion that followers of Jesus are to have for making certain that people have a decent opportunity for a healthy, wholesome, rewarding life.

Abraham Lincoln once saw a slave girls being sold on an auction block like a head of cattle. She was being sold away from her family and friends. Lincoln saw the fright and terror in her eyes. “This thing must go,” Lincoln said. From that point forward much of his life was dedicated to the destruction of the barbaric institution of slavery and that pursuit cost many people their lives and brought forward many injustices.

Still, few concepts are more Christian than the demand for justice. Wherever people are oppressed there is a need for justice. I struggle to know how to manage the intersection between kindness and justice.

Recently I was reading a story from Charles Dicken’s England some two hundred years ago. At that time, many twelve-year-old boys were working in coal mines down dangerous mine shafts. Their lives were miserable but that was what was expected of twelve-year-old boys from poor families in England at the time: a lifetime of hard work in the coal mines, beginning when they were children.

The church tried to be kind to these boys. They would offer presents at Christmas time. Their families would receive an expression of love and charity and a holiday goose or turkey would be provided. The church would offer prayers for the boys working in those mines.

However, one day some determined leaders in the church pursued a new approach toward the boys in Parliament. New regulations began to change the culture and law eventually insisted that these boys go to school rather than work in the mines. Simultaneously wages for miners increased.

I asked myself, “Is this the difference between acts of kindness and doing justice?” Kindness is giving Christmas gifts to disadvantaged families of boys in coal mines; kindness is giving their families a Christmas goose with which to share and kindness is praying for them all. This is important to do. Doing justice is working to change the society so that twelve-year-old boys will be expected to go to school rather than work in mines in the first place.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In our desire to be great, we often miss what is good. We fail to pay attention to what God would have us do. We fail to pray, to seek God's face, to discern together what the will of God might be. In church meetings, this looks like lobbying and voting. At home, it looks more like neglecting daily prayer and reading the Scriptures and failing to gather with the people of God. We tend only to pay attention to God when we need something from God; otherwise, we are pursuing greatness on our own. That is a formula for failure if it is true that God wants us to be good.  
  
When we pay attention to God, humbling ourselves, it's then that we can begin to stay faithful to the covenant and do justice as servants of God. It's only then that we become good because we are embracing God's goodness.   
  
Granted, it's tempting to go after greatness. Greatness gets your name on the cover of a magazine. It gets you the award, the gold watch, the recognition we believe we so richly deserve. But God doesn't require greatness. God requires goodness. Goodness is more sustainable, but it takes a long view to see that. When we focus on doing God's will, being faithful to God's covenant and being attentive to God's leading, we have done all that we were meant to do -- regardless of whether the results impress anyone else.

Making an impression may take a shift in approach. Soren Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher in the 19th century once clarified a common misconception about worship and life use theater as an image. He said that when we come to worship God, we generally feel as though the preacher is the performer, God is the prompter and we are the congregation is the audience. But, says Kierkegaard, those in the congregation are the performers, the preacher is the prompter and God is the audience. Humbly, we should strive to do excellently. God is looking for a good performance.

The early Christian church seemed to have embraced a goodness-over-greatness strategy for its own growth. In his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, historian Alan Kreider looked at the rapid growth of the early church and wanted to see what exactly caused the church to grow during a time when it was underground and persecuted. We would expect him to find that it was about measures of greatness -- grand evangelism strategies, great preaching, attractive worship, superior leadership, better methods - all things that we measure and value in a good-to-great culture.[[9]](#footnote-9)   
  
In most every case, Kreider discovered that the real virtue that caused the early church to grow was *patient faithfulness*. They spent up to three years examining people before admitting them to membership, during which they trained them in faithfulness and to represent the character of Christ. Interestingly, their documents reveal that they didn't have much of a focus on evangelism or on preaching. Instead, it was about cultivating faithfulness and building up people whose behavior looked more like Jesus.   
  
They attracted others not because of their success but because of their character.   
  
In other words, they focused on goodness, not greatness. *They measured success by growing good people rather than by growing a great church.*  
  
That's our measurement as well. Are we kindly doing justice, seeking the will of God in everything we do? Do we love faithfulness, living out the covenant with God we made in our baptism? And are we walking humbly, paying attention to what God is doing in our lives and in the world around us?   
  
That's what the Lord requires of us.

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**Commentary on Micah**

The first eight verses of the sixth chapter of Micah report a controversy between the people of Israel and Yahweh, their God. The controversy appears to have arisen, ostensibly, at least, from the Israelites' exaggerated sense of the complexity of Yahwistic worship, on the one hand, and an unwillingness, on the other hand, to acknowledge the unyielding and comprehensive demands of righteousness that form the basis of genuine Yahwistic religion.                                                                                                              
The book of Micah has traditionally been viewed as falling into two major sections, the first beginning with a divine appearance (a theophany), 1:2-5:15, and the second, beginning with our passage, which is introduced with a trial scene in which Israel brings a complaint against its God, 6:1-7:20. This "covenant lawsuit," as the literary form is sometimes called, is, in turn, part of an oracle of doom (6:1-7:7), one of several that alternate in a regular pattern with oracles of salvation throughout the book (e.g., 1:1-2:11 = doom; 2:12-13 = salvation; 3:1-12 = doom; 4:1-5:15 = salvation; etc.).  
  
As a form of prophetic speech, the covenant lawsuit -- often called a *riv*, from the Hebrew noun meaning "dispute" or "controversy" -- was identified by form-critical scholars in the early days of historical-critical scholarship, and in its classical form consists of several elements: (1) an appeal to cosmic elements as witnesses to the trial; (2) a summons to the defendant (Israel or the nations) to hear the charges brought against them; (3) the listing of the specific complaints; (4) a series of rhetorical questions; (5) a recital of the gracious acts God has performed on behalf of Israel; and (6) an announcement of Israel's (or the nations') guilt and punishment. Rarely are all these elements found in any given example of the form, which has led more recent scholars to question whether the form per se exists. For further history, analysis and examples of the *riv* see James Luther Mays (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 129.  
  
The present passage opens with the summons to "Hear" (v. 1), using a plural verb with an unspecified object, addressing hearers in general. The verbs in the second half of the verse (rise, plead) are masculine singular in form, indicating that Israel, personified as a male, is the addressee, and anticipating, in part, the (masculine singular) response in verses 6ff.  
  
Israel is first invited to plead its case before the mountains and hills (v. 1b), nouns arranged in synonymous poetic parallelism. Then the point of view shifts, and attention is focused on the Lord (v. 2a), who, the prophet says, "has a controversy (*riv*) with his people" (v. 2b).  
  
The imagery of the covenant lawsuit is derived principally from two sources: the civil lawsuit in ancient Israel, and suzerainty treaties from the ancient Near East. Although we should be cautious about juxtaposing the philosophy and mechanics of modern legal systems on ancient Israel, what evidence we have suggests that when two parties were in dispute, they brought their disagreement to a third party to adjudicate. The third party could be a judge, a priest, a group of elders, the king or some combination thereof (cf. Deuteronomy 17:8-12; Joshua 20:4; 2 Samuel 15:2-6; etc.).   
  
The prophets took up this general procedure in the form of the covenant lawsuit -- a dispute that had fractured the covenantal relationship between the Lord and Israel -- and used it to point to the various manifestations of Israel's breach of covenantal obligations (e.g., Isaiah 1:2-20; 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:4-13; 25:30-31; Hosea 4:1-3; 12:2-14). In prophetic writings, the form was elaborated and modified to suit the needs of the particular prophet (or school) and context.  
  
One of the common themes of the prophetic *riv* is the calling of cosmic elements as witnesses to the dispute. This practice of calling natural elements as witnesses, obviously frivolous in actual secular litigation, is derived from the treaties in the ancient Near East between a suzerain (an overlord or dominating power) and a vassal (or client). Along with the gods of the suzerain, such treaties often listed natural elements, especially heaven and earth, as witnesses to the agreement, and such witnesses would also function to legitimate the suzerain's punishment of the vassal for any future violation of the treaty's terms.  
  
The summoning of cosmic elements to witness the covenant between the Lord and Israel is found in the OT, especially in Deuteronomy (e.g., 4:26; 30:19; 31:28), where heaven and earth are called to witness against Israel's potential violation of the covenant. The summoning of mountains, hills and the "enduring foundations of the earth" (vv. 1-2) to witness the controversy is unique to this passage. The foundations of the earth refer to the pillars upon which the flat earth was supported above the watery abyss (cf. Isaiah 40:21; Psalm 82:5; etc.).  
  
Behind the Lord's questions in verse 3 lies the implicit accusation: The Lord has wearied Israel through the burdens of the covenant. Far from wearying Israel, the Lord redeemed (or ransomed) Israel by bringing the people up from Egyptian slavery. There is a play on the Hebrew verbs in the juxtaposition of "wearied" (*hel'etïka*) and "brought you up" (*he' elïtïka*).  
  
The reference to the exodus is the start of the list of the Lord's gracious acts on behalf of Israel, commonly found in the prophetic *riv*, and stereotyped to include the exodus deliverance, the wilderness preservation and the entry into the promised land (contained here in vv. 4-5).  
  
The combination of Moses, Aaron and Miriam is found nowhere else in prophetic writings, and this is the only reference to Miriam outside the Pentateuch. The three names are found together only once more in the entire OT, at Numbers 26:59, as the offspring of Jochebed, their mother. Moses is the pre-eminent exodus and wilderness leader, and Aaron figures regularly throughout the same narratives, but in later historical recitals, Moses eclipsed both his brother and his sister in Israel's memory.  
  
When Israel is urged to "remember" the Lord's gracious acts on its behalf (v. 5), the sense of the verb is more than simple recollection; the sense approaches the idea of confession. To remember in such cultic contexts means to "recall the past and confront it as present reality" (Mays, 135). Israel is what it is, at the moment it is called to remember, only by virtue of the Lord's gracious acts being recollected.  
  
Knowledge of the wilderness narratives behind the references to Balak and Balaam (v. 5) is assumed. According to Numbers 22, King Balak of Moab summoned a seer, Balaam, to curse Israel (and so end or impede its progress through the wilderness), but, under the Lord's influence, Balaam was able only to bless Israel as it journeyed toward the promised land.  
  
Similarly, the references to Shittim and Gilgal must point to the third stage in the typical recital of gracious divine acts, namely, the crossing of the Jordan River and entry into the promised land. Shittim was the site of Israel's camp on the east side of the Jordan, and Gilgal served the same function on the west side of the Jordan, so their combination here recalls Israel's successful crossing of that symbolically important river (Joshua 3-5).  
  
The final verses of the oracle (vv. 6-8) set up a rhetorical series of questions concerning sacrifices of increasingly extravagant value -- the possible wearisome burdens of which Israel complained in the first half of the oracle -- leading to the climactic answer of verse 8, which undermines a misplaced devotion to the sacrificial cult. Most of the sacrifices mentioned -- burnt offerings of calves (v. 6) and rams and oil (v. 7) -- are standard sacrificial material -- but the inclusion of child sacrifice (v. 7b) is intentionally shocking. Although child sacrifice was practiced by at least some of Israel's neighbors and almost certainly by Israel itself to an unknown degree, human sacrifice of any kind was always regarded by the biblical writers as rare, exceptional and apostate. Its inclusion in this list represents the unacceptable extreme in Israel's sacrificial cult.  
  
The oracle concludes with the true expectations of Israel's God: the performance of justice, the love of kindness and the humble (or cautious or circumspect) cleaving to the God whose gracious acts on Israel's behalf have modeled the behavior expected.

1. Collins, Jim. *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't*. HarperBusiness, 2001.  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Goldstein, Michael. "Revisiting good to great: What happened to those 11 companies? Hmmmmm ...." *Match Education Website*. July 3, 2012. matcheducation.org [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Preaching from the Minor Prophets*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdman's, 1998. 72-76. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. You might see this lived out in the film, *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (available on Netflix or Amazon). At the end of Mr. Holland’s Opus there is a conversation about Mr. Holland never being rich or famous, but students talk about him, sharing the opinion that he had been the music teacher they all needed throughout his career. It is a story about faithfulness and humility. bgb [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Information also shared by Rev. Dr. Roula Alkhouri, pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church of Batavia, NY. Roula grew up as a Christian in Damascus Syria and to the best of my knowledge is the first Syrian woman to be ordained into Christian ministry. Roula is a naturalized U.S. citizen and has a special compassion and relationship to Syrian Christians. http://fpcbatavia.org/about-us/staff/rev-dr-roula-alkhouri/ [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Matthew 5:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. I was wonderfully moved and inspired the first time I saw Pitman Painters on stage. It is a play about coal miners in northern England, some of who had been in the mines since age 11. They wanted to better their education and eventually learn how to paint. I don’t agree with some of the more negative reviews, but the book and the play are worth a read and a see. My first encounter with the work was at Grove City College about three years ago. http://www.cltampa.com/arts-entertainment/theater/article/20828832/review-the-pitmen-painters-american-stage [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kreider, Alan. *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*. Baker Academic, 2016.  [↑](#footnote-ref-9)