

Vision for the People of Covenant

Micah 6: 1-8, Matthew 20: 1-15

We, Christians, are the people who are in covenant with God. Then, what can be our vision in relation to the covenant? In other words, what can be the vision for the people of covenant? When you are married to a loved one, you answer Yes to the following question: "Will you love her, comfort her, honor and keep her in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto her, so long as you both shall live?" When you become a United States Citizen, you take an oath saying, "I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America against all enemies, foreign and domestic." When we become Christians, we confess that Jesus Christ is my Lord, the Son of Living God and pledge that I will just follow Jesus. What is the vision of the people who are making such a covenant? What is your vision in relation to covenant with God?

I believe that to keep it, to keep the covenant consistently is the vision. A covenant exists to be kept. When we keep the covenant consistently, the life of covenant continues. The issue is, the question is, how we, the people of God, can keep the covenant with God. Today, Micah is telling us: act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God (v.8). When we live in acting justly, in loving mercy, in walking humbly with your God, we are keeping the covenant with God.

As I was meditating on the meanings of these words, I was reminded of a parable told by Jesus Christ, the parable of landowner who went out to hire men to work in his vineyard in Matthew 20. This story is marvelous in the sense that I can find the meanings of acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God entirely in one story.



A landowner went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He made a contract with them to pay a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard. Then, about the nine o'clock he went out and saw others standing in the marketplace doing nothing. He hired them and brought them into his vineyard. The landowner came to the market at 12 o'clock again. Then, he did the same thing. He came back at 3 o'clock to the marketplace. Then he hired people who were still doing nothing. It was not the last chance. At 5 o'clock afternoon, just before one

hour the work will finish, he went to the marketplace, and brought them into his vineyard.

When evening came, the owner of the vineyard ordered to his foreman to call the workers and pay them their wages, beginning with the last ones hired and going on to the first. What would the workers expect for their wages? The workers who worked for just one hour received a denarius. What would be the response from the workers who came to the vineyard at early morning? It's just unfair! It's an unfair contract, unfair covenant! In fact, when they received it, they began to grumble against the landowner. They complained openly. They said 'these men who were hired last worked only one hour,' 'and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the work and the heat of the day.'

It is a natural response. In my common sense, in my understanding of "justice," it is wrong, unfair, and unjust. If you are the workers who worked from the early morning, how will you respond to the landowner? If you found such an unjust contract between you and your employer, how would you respond?

"But the landowner answered one of them, 'Friend, I am not being unfair to you. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius?' It was the contract. The landowner just kept his promise, his covenant.

The Landowner continues to answer, "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?"

The landowner acted justly in his way. When he went to the marketplace the second time, he told them, 'You also go and work in my vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' One denarius, same amount for the first hired workers from the early morning.

Here I would like to share the life story of my cousin's husband who is living in LA. He is a painter. On his way to work, he always stops by the parking lot of a home depot near his house. That is about 6 o' clock, early morning. There are many people waiting for a "land owner" who may hire them for a day's work. Most of them are immigrants from a third world country. Maybe most of them are non-documented people. He picks up two workers and then leaves for the workplace. He is often saying to me about how to select a man of solid build for his work. He is a professional painter and he can find such men at one glance.

Let us return to the landowner story. Let us imagine a society in which Jesus was living. When usual landowners came to the marketplace, whom did they pick up? Yes, men of solid build. Who would hire weak men, women, old persons, children, or disabled people at all? But, in marketplace, there are not just men of muscularity, there are a plenty of women, old persons, disabled people, children, too. Poor women who lost their husbands had no choice except go the marketplace to earn money for her survival. Elderly persons must go to the marketplace too, because they lost their children who could take care of them or they must take care of their grand kids. Even children must go to the marketplace, because they are orphans, because their parents are sick. Imagine who were hanging around the market place until evening without everyday bread.

Here we can ask what justice is. What is fairness? Our landowner is saying that he is doing "whatever is right," when he gives the same wage, one denarius enough for a day's life, even to workers who just worked for one hour. This is the biblical justice, I believe. If you are the people of covenant, this justice is required of us. The landowner is saying that "Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?" The land owner is generous. The land owner is a person of mercy. Here we can find justice and mercy kiss each other. Justice and mercy are two sides of the same coin. If I imagine that I came to the vineyard early in the morning, what does our land owner expect from me now? Yes, these women, elderly persons, children worked just for one hour, Yes, the most amount of money they received from landowner must be mine actually, but they deserve to get one denarius like me, because they are the same humans like me, they are humans who need to survive like me. I believe that to have this kind of attitude toward our fellow people is to walk humbly with God.

My Disciples friends, if we talk about the vision, if we talk about the vision of the covenant people, it is to follow Jesus' way to live together. To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God, these are the way for the covenantal people. Remember the reason why Jesus gave us this story of vineyard landowner. The story begins like this, "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard."

Yes, Jesus is telling us about Heaven! This is our vision, the final goal. To live with this landlord's mind and heart is the vision for the people of covenant.
Amen.

Delivered by Rev. Jinsuk Chun, newly installed Executive Pastor of NAPAD, at the 2012 NAPAD Convocation, on the campus of Chapman University, in Orange, California, at the closing worship service.

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