

Micah 6:6-8

**With what shall I come to the Lord and bow myself before the God on high?**

**Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings, with yearling calves?**

**Does the Lord take delight in thousands of rams, in ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?**

My wife and I have had hundreds of conversations in the car about where the line is between sins? We have entered several churches and left confused about what is right and wrong. What is good and bad? Are blessings good and curses bad? The Psalm above has God asking a great question. What shall you bring to make things okay? Better yet, what could you do to gain God's favor? In the remaining pages of this chapter I'd like to explore the line between holiness and sin. Somewhere in that mix are blessings and curses, and quite possibly you and me.

How can we know if a blessing is a blessing? That seems like a strange question because a blessing is good, right? We deserved this blessing because of the good things we did in the sight of God. If we believe in karma, then goodness befalls us. Did we do good things to get a blessing? The reason I ask these questions is because of the line between right and wrong. This line is not the same for any person existing in the history of humankind. So how do we measure who is doing good or bad. Are these people deserving of a blessing or a curse?

I think capital punishment is fine. Certainly, others do not. I believe in paying an honest wage to people. There are church boards that pay far less to pastors and staff than they should. *Canada Post* gives me about 2.5 cents per junk mail piece I deliver. They make roughly 14 cents

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per piece. Is it a sin to pay less than we deserve or is it fine to make a great profit at the expense of the worker? Proverbs 3:27-28 says, **"Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to do it. Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come again, tomorrow I will give it"—when you have it with you."** Yet, the Bible also says in Psalm 128:2, **"You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours."** The line between right and wrong is vague.

Owners do have the right to make money. The worker has the right to a fair wage. Somewhere within this is the line between right and wrong or honesty and corruption. I was watching a Law and Order episode where a Serbian military leader had fled to America after he was accused of brutal crimes in his homeland. In New York, a former Serbian woman who was raped by him accidentally noticed her attacker in a cab. The end result was her being arrested for his murder. Did she sin against God as the victim of war crimes?

Was it a blessing that the woman found her rapist? Was she cursed as a young girl as she was raped in Serbia? Let's say, for argument's sake, that the Serbian leader was abused as a boy. When he entered the military he was trained to abuse the enemy. Maybe all he ever knew was abuse. Let's go further and find out the woman was a thief and was raised to steal, lie, and cheat all her life. Maybe she stole from the man. My point is that there are many views of why we do what we do. Sometimes the actions we take look right to some and twisted to others. Who is justified?

Romans 3:28 says, **"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."** This thought is that we cannot be justified by what we do or the laws we keep. There is always motive and pride involved in all we do. The woman in the show killed her attacker years later. She has motive. After all these years she did it on principle to kill the memories. Pride in

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the dictionary says: **"A high or inordinate opinion of one's own dignity, importance, merit, or superiority, whether as cherished in the mind or as displayed in bearing, conduct."**

There was pride in her motive to repair her dignity with murder.

I realize this is a tough scenario. Rape is a horrible thing. A man is never justified in doing such things to others. What if he thought he was justified in his actions? What if she thought she was justified in her actions? In the show, she went to jail for her actions. He died (of course) for his. People have their reasons for doing the actions they choose.

It gets really interesting when we look at the sin of adultery. A man lives with a verbally abusive wife. A nice woman comes along and leaves his wife for her. A woman loses herself in a marriage and leaves for a younger, adventurous man to find herself. They believe with all their heart that they are justified in their life choices.

This all plays out in the confession box. I know not everyone is Catholic so go with me on this one. The confession box is the place where you can go to safely tell your sins. What's interesting is what's told and what's left out. Suppose those people lined up to talk with the priest. First enters the raped woman. She bows her head and confesses that she exacted revenge on her attacker. The priest offers her forgiveness for her sins. She did, however, not mention that she was a thief, liar, and cheater in her homeland. The door opens and the next person enters.

The woman in adultery bows her head and confesses she has left her husband. The priest forgives her of her sins. She neglected to say she left for another man and had an affair while they were still married. The door opens and the husband in adultery enters. He admits he has sinned. He said he had ill thoughts about his wife. The priest forgives him of his sins and the door opens once again. The man forgot to mention he left his wife, and refuses to pay child support.

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In the eyes of these people, they are clean. In the eyes of the priest they are forgiven. They feel better and the priest feels better. Suppose the priest has been secretly having a fling with a prostitute but he never confesses that. Is he justified in God's eyes because he helped do God's work in the confession box? Are any of these people blessed because they confessed their sins? Are they cursed because they left things out? If they go on with their day feeling good about themselves, are they deserving of a blessing? Good things come to those who do good things, right?

There is a ritual or tradition in the church called, "laying hands." You might say that someone in leadership has the authority to bless others in the name of God. My wife and I received such a blessing some years ago. I finished school and became a pastor. Along the way, I could not get accepted as a pastor in a church (we'll get to that later). Did I receive God's blessing or a curse?

I know that others laid hands on my wife because she had health problems. She has never been healed. Was her faith not strong enough to receive a blessing? Some people said that is exactly why God never healed her. Mark 10:52: **"Go," said Jesus, "your faith has healed you." Immediately he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road.**" Is God dispensing blessings and curses based on faith? In a way, my wife feels her health issues are a curse.

There are strange lines here. Is the faith of the hand layer in question? Maybe their faith is not where it needs to be. Is the faith of my wife and I in question? Are there blessings and healings based solely on our faith? Romans 12:3 says, **"Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you**

**really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us.**" There is much more to understand when it comes to blessings and curses.

Perspective is everything. Remember above I quoted Romans 3:28: **"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."** My wife should be justified in being healed because she believes in Jesus, yet she is not healed. The blessing of healing has not been given to her even though she has asked many times. She has prayed, confessed her sins, and believed in God, but things remain the same. For some reason God chooses if or when a blessing should happen. He seems to feel the same way with curses. The "why" now or "why" not now is perspective.

Isaiah 3:10 says, **"Tell the righteous it will be well with them, for they will enjoy the fruit of their deeds."** Do we receive blessings because we do good things? If I choose not to sin will it go well with me? I have had incidents where I held a door for someone and found 20 dollars hours later. Was I blessed by God for my deeds? My wife picked up a fallen item off the floor for a man and he said thank you. However, to my knowledge she has not received a blessing for her good deed. Where is her twenty dollars? It seems I have been blessed more than my wife.

Some weeks ago I found twenty dollars on the street twice in two weeks. Why on earth did that happen? I read my Bible more frequently than usual one day and received a call to help someone. I considered the call a blessing. Is it that the more I read the Bible the more I am blessed? Each of us have secrets we will never tell. There are things we share, to a friend maybe, and we feel better afterwards. I have apologized to my wife for a stupid word I have said and usually our relationship improves after that. Are the good feelings and good relations a blessing from God because I apologized and fixed it?

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I took my kids on a road trip to a Christian event and we ended up in an accident. Why? Did I do something wrong? Was it a curse from God? I bought tires in the winter, on three separate vehicles, and a month later, each time, the vehicles were destroyed. What did I do to deserve that? I got in six accidents in five years. Three were my fault and three were not. Was I a cursed driver? My kids would certainly say yes.

All these stories bring it home for me in regards to blessings and curses. Did I receive a blessing or receive a curse? Did I deserve it or not? There is perspective on being justified in your own eyes. There is perspective on what we call sin. I know people who think drinking is a sin yet they don't have a problem paying the minimum wage to their pastors. Are they sinners or justified? I think it's a sin to not believe in God. There are those that say all good people go to heaven regardless if they believe. Strange that I have met so many that don't believe but want to go to heaven.

I hate that I do bad things. I wish I could be cleaner. There are things others do which make me wonder if they are going to hell. How can I judge them of their sin? It comes down to two things in our eyes. Did we cause our own trouble or blessings? Did we deserve a curse or warrant a blessing? Is what I call sin really a sin? Some say yes and others say no. This is why I have reiterated for four chapters now to reconsider curses and blessings. Things are not as they seem in the physical and spiritual world.

Let's take a look at Acts 5 in the Bible. I have heard several sermons on the first story in this chapter. I am not so sure that anyone had given a sermon on the rest of the chapter. If you take a good look at Acts 5 as a whole, it's clearly an amazing piece of writing. Blessings and curses come in so many forms. What one thinks is a blessing might be a curse and vice versa. This chapter 5 in Acts exemplifies what I mean.

Acts 5:1-2 **"But there was a certain man named Ananias who, with his wife, Sapphira, sold some property. 2 He brought part of the money to the apostles, claiming it was the full amount. With his wife's consent, he kept the rest."**

This story goes on to tell of their deception. Each of them was asked separately if they gave all the money. Each said yes. God struck each of them down dead. What is commonly missed is the blessings. Patrick, what blessings, they are dead? Sometimes perception is all we have. We are told they are bad people and we accept that, however there is much more to this story.

These two people were fine upstanding individuals and they belonged to a Christian community that gave to the poor and helped those in need. There was probably fellowship and dinner together celebrating the Lord. This couple had money, they owned property, and had the ability to sell it and remain rich. I doubt they gave away all they had. I do think underneath all this the community knew the hearts of Ananias and Sapphira. Why ask them or accuse them of lying? These two were probably similar to Judas – always close fisted and putting value on everything.

In my mind these were two blessed people. They had been given much more in life than those around them. I think their hearts leaned towards God, but how far is the question. We get so lost and caught up in God killing them that we lose the bigger picture here. They were blessed.

The other side of this story is the people who witnessed their deaths. If you read Acts 5:11 it says, **"Great fear gripped the entire church and everyone else who heard what had happened."** I worked in a church that was very well off. Money poured into that place. If someone had cheated the church and died, I bet several other people would have been freaked

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out. I doubt this couple in Acts 5 were the only dishonest ones. Great fear gripped this place because dishonestly was acted upon by God. I suspect giving increased that day.

You could say that Ananias and Sappirha became cursed that day. I would also say that the whole community wanted to avoid further curses. That story was just 11 verses of 42. Yes, the Bible is written by scroll and not by verse, which makes this story even smaller except for one word: "meanwhile." Verse 12 begins with that word, so the point of this section is not finished. Meanwhile is a conjunction joining two things together. Their deaths are joined to the story of the rest of the community.

It says further on that nobody dared to join the apostles. I bet getting too close to God was a tall order, and I bet honesty and integrity played a role. I bet the people thought you had to be clean and special to be an apostle. These men could heal people and caused quite a stir around the countryside. The power of God could be seen in the deaths of Ananias and Sappirha and the healing of the sick. That frightened everyone.

As the story progressed, the religious authorities became jealous. Obviously the apostles were gaining followers at an alarming rate. I suspect the money began to flow the other way. Do you really think the authorities were that concerned over men preaching and healing? This story begins with money and the Bible tends to be written in themes. There is a direct correlation here between blessings, curses, and money. I bet those with money were no different than Ananias and Sappirha. I bet the actions by God scared the hell out of them.

In verse 41 it says, "**The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.**" It's interesting that these men did good in the name of the Lord, but were arrested and flogged for their actions. Men in high places felt it was an act against God. However, the apostles were freed several times and became joyful



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in their sufferings. What one group saw as a curse became a blessing to another. That's why I say that blessings and curses are the same thing. It's all about perspective.

I love chapters like Acts 5. We focus on the negative and miss the positive. Both the apostles and Ananias and Sappirha were blessed. Both received a curse because of their actions. Yet, it's the apostles who believed their curse was a blessing in disguise. It's like the ancient men of Genesis. They died and that is bad, yet they wanted to have their bones returned to God's Promised Land to receive a blessing. The mentality in those days was that bad things happen but blessings through God were always the main goal.

There is a crazy story in Genesis 27 about Isaac and his two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob steals his older brothers blessing from his father. The interesting part is the deception. Jacob fakes that he is Esau so his father thinks he is the brother. After the father gives the blessing, the deception is exposed. Isaac says to Esau, "I can't take back the blessing and give it to you." In that day what was said is said and can't be taken back.

I find it interesting that Jacob took the blessing but became cursed by another family member. Esau lost the blessing but became blessed and powerful. Why didn't God kill Jacob for his deception like he killed Ananias and Sappirha? Is God neurotic or something? Does a good God treat one person with favor no matter how bad they are? We have asked this question for centuries: "Why do bad people succeed?"

I think it comes back to the question, "Where is the line"? What is good for one person is a curse for another. What is a sin for one is good for another. If we do good, where is the blessing? How often do we wish curses on the wicked? God seems so random with his choices. Would it not be easier if a blessing was a blessing and a curse a curse? Would it not be easier if sin was spelled out plainly as sin?

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Are there lines? Emerson quotes, **"One man's justice is another's injustice one mans beauty another's ugliness one mans wisdom another's folly."** Maybe the lines aren't clear because God uses all things to complete His will. What is His will? Well that is subjective but we get a hint. I think God is always working towards community. There are three persons in the God head: Jesus (Son), Father, and Holy Ghost (Spirit). They work together as one. There are angels and cherubim in heaven. There are twelve thrones for the apostles, plus all the saved will be there one day.

Maybe God is working things out to make heaven a community like no other. What does that have to do with sin, or blessings and curses? I think it's how God gets us there. Emerson (quoted above) could see it. A good thing happens to one person, which is bad for another. Is it possible God uses all things to make good? It's interesting that the ancient Hebrews were told of this Promised Land. Through the centuries these Hebrews were less than stellar, yet they believe the promise remains. They still wanted their bones to enter the land to receive the blessing.

Romans 8:28 says, **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** These Bible writers knew. Yes, they sinned and yes, they knew they were less than stellar; however, they believed God loved them above all else. The Bible goes out of it's way to say that the work we do will not get us into heaven. Paul writes over and over that he is the chief of sinners, but he believed in running the race towards God.

Paul wrote Ephesians 2:8-9: **"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."** He knew because he was raised to know. Over the last 19 centuries we have beat ourselves to death over what is sin. Christian leaders have created doctrine, theology, and creeds

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to make it clear. Through the years the doctrine and theology grew to become a burden more than a blessing. Jesus' observation about Jewish laws ring true today as they did then. Luke 11:46 **"Jesus replied, "And you experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them."**

The law of God is really the laws God gave Moses. They began with ten but have since been expanded. Pork is a sin but wine is not to a Jew. To a Mormon wine is a sin, but pork is not. Denominations exist in my thought because each of us believe different things are sin. Ironically Romans 3:23 fits well with this: **"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** Any denomination can believe they have cornered the sin market. They know what sin is and how to avoid it. Yet, "All have sinned and fallen short" rings in their ears.

This is not Biblical but I believe it. Grace is God's allowance for sin. God hates sin but lets it continue to reach his end. Does that make sense? Of course not, but can you explain God? Bad things happen to good people. Bad people do get what's coming to them. Some people are certainly blessed or cursed more than others. Is it by their person that they receive blessings and curses? We make lines but God does not. To God, sin is sin.

It comes down to doing what is right. That scares me because at the end of Judges it says, **"In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes."** How on earth can we individually know what is right? Two Christians are standing between two doors. One door leads to a bar and the other towards a casino. If they both choose one door, then who is going to heaven. Some would say both while others would say neither.

James 4:17 is the answer we have been looking for. **"So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin."** That seems to be another vague answer like Judges 21

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above. I think this verse conveys the heart of God. Do what is right in the eyes of the Lord. Most countries denounce murder. The definition might change but murder is murder. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know what adultery is. I had a preacher say once, "We know in our knower." Yeah, we do. We know what is right and wrong.

Am I sure? James 4:3 says, "**When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.**" That is this chapter in a nutshell. We pray for stuff but what is our motive? We believe we don't sin but what is the motive? The only reason you have a list of sins is so that your sins are not on it. I said before that sin comes down to motive and pride. The line of what is wrong or right depends on where you place your motives and pride.

Certainly, your actions will fall on the good side. The actions of others will be placed by you in relation to how it makes you look. Your motive is determined by your pride. God sees all sin as equal because His motives are good. He wants the best for you, me, and Himself. Most of the time we judge sin based on how we look first.

I want to bring this back to blessings and curses. We pray for blessings to be happy. We pray against curses so we remain happy. Being cursed is not making me happy. Be good and good things will happen. Maybe, but maybe not. The apostles thought differently. God could use a bad situation to grow you. Are you trying to be good so good things will happen? Maybe the trying is missing all the blessings you can't see or won't get through curses. Judging people through your view on sin might be a curse for you and others. I think running a race to win is good, but running the race is more important. Like James said, "Do what is right."

Blessings and curses happen. We are sinners so sin will happen. The love of God does not have a line. He is not happy one day and angry the next. Grace means, "**A way of moving**

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**that is smooth and attractive and that is not stiff or awkward."** They call it God's grace not our grace. He is moving smooth and attractive towards his goal of creating a community in heaven. How we get there depends on God more than it does on us; because all of us have fallen short of the glory of God.

They say the shortest distance between two objects is a straight line. I think we tend to go left and right to gain blessings and avoid curses. If we accepted blessings and curses as equal, then the line is straight in life and maybe there would be less chaos. How many stories have people veering off the path? That's the dangerous place. Where is the line with sin? It's between you and God. God knows the right way. We think we know the right way. Now take a good look at that line between. The truth is on the line, and our understanding of blessings and curses is on the line too.