

THE FAVORITE TEXT OF FAMOUS PEOPLE - J. Edgar Hoover
“The Message Of Micah For America”
Dr. John Allan Lavender
Micah 6:8

It is interesting that the favorite text of J. Edgar Hoover should be drawn from the book of Micah because in many ways the world of that day and this are closely akin.

The last half of the eighth century B.C. during which Micah prophesied, was a stirring time of strife and turmoil, crisis and change. It was a period of world revolution. A time when the people of God were under sharp attack. A day of social, political and religious infidelity. A time when the hellish qualities of greed, cruelty, corruption, idolatry, crime and immorality had so weakened the nation of Israel from within, it was unable to keep pace with the constant, mounting pressures from without.

A triumvirate of corrupt princes, carnal priests and careless people had led the nation into deep trouble. But through the intervention of Micah, a powerful young prophet from the plains of Palestine, the people were called back to God and the land of Israel was saved from imminent disaster.

There is much in common between that world and ours. A tidal wave of infidelity has swept across our land. Corruption in high places and low, unrestrained avarice and unbridled lust coupled with a careless and almost callous indifference on the part of much of the citizenry has led us into dire straits. We have been so weakened from within we are in an almost constant state of panic because of pressures from without.

Listen to the figures which Mr. Hoover reported on October 3, 1960, in an address to the International Association of Police Chiefs, “Since 1950 crime has increased 69%, four times as fast as our expanding population. Today we find ourselves confronted with the worst era of

lawlessness in the nation's history. Each 20 seconds another serious crime is added to the nation's total. A murder, forcible rape or assault to kill is committed every four minutes. There is a burglary every 46 seconds, a robbery every seven minutes and 33 automobiles stolen every hour.

“The specter of juvenile terrorism and gang style intimidation hangs menacingly over community after community. A surging teenager underworld, one which practices open defiance of the law and utter contempt for the rights and welfare of others, has arisen to challenge the forces of law and order.

“Since 1948 juvenile arrests have more than doubled, while the population in this age group has increased by less than one-half. Today youthful offenders account for more than one-fourth of the arrests for robberies, one-half of the burglary and larceny arrests, and nearly two-thirds of the arrests for automobile thefts.

Our nation's annual crime bill now totals \$22 billion, an amount equivalent to \$128 for every man, woman and child in the United States. For every \$1 spent contributed to religious organizations, crime costs our people \$9.”

Shocking as these statistics are, an even more distressing aspect of the problem lies in the fact that the sharpest rise in juvenile delinquency is in the “slumless” area where we would least expect to find it.

According to the October, 1960 issue of Pageant magazine, the growth of juvenile crime among our so-called “best” kids -- the youngsters from middle and upper-middle class suburbia -- has grown almost twice as rapidly as the big city brand. “While arrests of boys and girls under the age of 18 rose a distressing 7.1% in the large metropolitan areas last year, they rose a surprising and even more distressing 12.6% in the small towns, those under 25,000 in population.”

Indeed, these are perilous times. While we need to be on guard against the adversary without,

our much greater concern should be directed toward the enemy within, lest this land we love be lost from the face of the earth.

The formula Micah prescribed as the solution to Israel’s ills in the eighth century B.C. is equally applicable in our situation today. In fact, it is the favorite text and principal guide of the chief law officer of our nation, Director of The Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mr. J. Edgar Hoover.

Let me share the letter I recently received from him:

“Dear Dr. Lavender,

I have recently received your letter of May 27, 1960, and am pleased that you thought of me in connection with your ‘Favorite Texts of Famous People.’

From early childhood, I heard the Bible read aloud by both my mother and father. It is only natural that particular passages appeal to different people, and the 8th verse of the 6th chapter of Micah has particular meaning to me. ‘He hath shewed thee, o man, what is good. And what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, to love mercifully and to walk humbly with thy God.’

I am most grateful for your kind comments concerning my administration of the FBI. Any success this bureau has achieved is due, of course, to the loyal and devoted service of my associates throughout the organization.

Sincerely,

J. Edgar Hoover”

To a nation beset by ills and evils which threatened to destroy it, the prophet Micah offered a three-point program for national survival and renewal. What he proposed has great meaning for us today.

Here in a single shining sentence this spirited spokesman for God presents the simple essentials of

real religion with such clarity and conciseness that even he who runs may read: Do good. Love God. Because you are good.

Unlike many self-styled prophets, Micah made no promise of a primrose path. Instead, he directed the attention of the people to their duties, both to God and man.

He knew no religion without responsibility. No salvation without service. No deliverance without diligence. No consciousness of God without a concurrent commitment to good. And conversely, no cultivation of good without a concurrent commitment to God. Do good, and love good, because you are good, he said. Or to quote directly from our text, “Do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.”

In laying out his program for national survival and renewal, Micah drew three concentric circles into which people tend to group themselves as they move from the circumference to the center of a truly righteous life.

Do Good

Crowded together around the outer rim of society is a great host of those who do good because they have found, in the last analysis, it is to their advantage. These are they who operate from a base of “enlightened self-interest.” They have learned from long experience “it pays to be good.”

When one begins a study of comparative religions, his faith is often disturbed by the fact that on the purely ethical plain there is a great deal of similarity between the teachings of Jesus and those of other religious leaders. This apparent similarity should not give in to alarm, however, because when you stop to think the matter through, it becomes obvious that the right way of living is the best way. It stirs up fewer problems and provides more genuine pleasure than any effort to skirt the limits of legality.

Lincoln once said, “No man has a good enough memory to be a successful liar.” That was honest

Abe’s way of saying “it pays to be good.”

One rarely becomes an alcoholic who has not previously been a social drinker. Few illegitimate babies are born that are not the result of prior promiscuous sex. Criminals seldom fall into lives of crime who have not earlier formed a habit of basic disrespect for law. Not many become cynical or fatalistic without previously having been recklessly irreligious.

It is a simple fact that “the wages of sin is death.” Death to our highest and our best. Death to all sense of real serenity and security. Death to those deeper joys that can come only through righteous living. And if pursued long enough and far enough, death to our immortal souls.

When compared to that eventuality, it becomes clear to any who gives it thought that “it pays to be good.” And so, congregated together on the outer rim of society is a great company of “do-gooders,” people who are moral and true because they have learned that in the last analysis the right way is the best way.

Many of these are Christians who are content to just get by. In spite of all the “prima facie” evidence in support of doing good, they cut their participation in the Kingdom’s cause to an irreducible minimum.

They are like the lost coin about which Jesus spoke in the 15th chapter of St. Luke. It was not counterfeit. In fact, as far as we know, there was nothing wrong with it at all. It was just lost. Out of circulation. And therefore, unavailable to its owner.

This is the case with a great host of Christians. They are not evil in the traditional sense, they are just unavailable. Christ owns them, but he does not possess them. As a result, He is unable to use them.

I own a beautiful maroon sports jacket which is a favorite because my wife gave it to me shortly

after we were married. However, I never wear it. In fact, I haven't even seen it for nearly ten years because I left my jacket in an unlocked automobile and somebody stole it. I own it, but I don't possess it. Therefore, I cannot use it.

It's possible, you see, for Christ to “own” you while at the same time he does not “possess” you. You are not available to him. You are out of circulation. You are as lost to his cause as if you had never belonged to him!

Dr. Louis H. Evans tells the story of a wealthy Arab who had faithfully fed a beggar sitting at his gate. One day the Arab was in extreme difficulty and needed someone to run an errand immediately. He summoned the beggar and asked him to do the service. The beggar drew himself up to his haughty height and said, “I ask alms, I do not run errands!”

Dr. Evans observes that this is the difficulty with many of us. “We ask alms of Christ, peace, pardon, power, His presence and millions of other gifts, but we will not run His errands. We ask of Him, but we do not allow Him to ask of us. To us, religion is more ‘intake’ than it is ‘out-go.’ (We are) always talking about how much we can ask of God, and seldom of how much God is able to ask of us!”

One young woman put it this way, “Jesus Christ upsets me. It is said of him that he went about doing good. I spend my time just ‘going about.’”

Well, thank God, she was upset! And one thing the multitude of folks crowded together around the outer rim is to lay stress upon the verb -- do good, do justly and do follow through on your commitments to Christ. The world is in desperate need of “doing” Christians. People who are not content to be spectators, hitch-hikers to heaven, getting a free ride at the expense of others. People who are ready, willing and anxious to carry not only their fair share of the load, but a part of the burden of their less capable or qualified brothers as well. “What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly . . .”

Love Good

But there is something better than doing good, and that is loving good. Here we move into the second of these three concentric circles, and in the process, closer to the real spirit of a truly righteous life.

It is one thing to do good because it pays off. It is quite another to love good for its sake alone, and therefore to engage in works of righteousness not for any thought of personal gain or benefit, but because of a deep sense of compassion and love.

If I were to hazard a guess, I would say this simple love of good is the missing ingredient in much of America's foreign policy today. This, I believe, is the cause of much of the hostility which we find in the hearts of those we have tried to help.

We have spent billions of dollars in undergirding the economies of our little brothers across the seas. We have fed millions, clothed thousands and housed hundreds of people. But how much of this was done because we really love them?

Is it not true that most of our benevolence has been based upon the philosophy of enlightened self-interest? “It's good for the defense of America,” is the reason so often given in support of our foreign aid program. We are willing to help, but we expect those we help to do something for us in return. We have done the right thing, but for the wrong reason, and it has backfired.

Instead of narrowing the gap, we have widened the chasm between us and the very people to whom we have extended a helping hand. Or we are discovering how deep and wide that chasm really is.

Somewhere the Bible speaks about God loving a “cheerful giver.” If we take that text at face value, it teaches us the really important thing is not the act of giving, but the attitude with which we give. More important than our doing, is the spirit in which that doing is done.

Isn't that the meaning of the strange story of Christ's passing over the greater gifts of the more affluent, while he paused to praise the widow's mite? They gave much, hoping for the notice and praise of men. She gave little out of an overflow of love, and gained the praise of God.. And do you know what?

“The world is dying for a little bit of love,
For the love that rights the wrong,
For the love that sings the song,
It has waited, oh, so long
For a little bit of love.”

One of the most precious jewels in the world is the Hand Opal. It is so named because it never shows its real fire and beauty until it has felt the warmth of a human hand.

Some of the most priceless jewels in God's Kingdom are those seemingly listless, fireless, purposeless people who need only to feel the warmth of a human hand extended to them in Christian love, to be awakened to their true worth and natural beauty.

This brings it down to you and me. One of the most popular parlor games in the U.S. this season is taking “pot shots” at other people. This practice of blaming “them” is an appealing one because it's much easier to blame a nameless, faceless “them” for our situation than to accept responsibility for our own mis-behavior. But U.S. spells “us!” And therein lies one cause of our trouble.

You and I cannot shrug off our involvement in what America is. We are responsible, if not directly through our actions, then indirectly through our inaction. Nor can we be content just to do good. We must learn to love good for itself alone. We must engage in works of righteousness, not because of what they can do for us, but because of what we can do for others. At the base of our actions must be that “cheerful heart,” that right attitude the Bible speaks about.

Then we will have taken several strong strides toward the third circle which lies at the center of a truly righteous life and is concerned with being good. That is to say, we love good, and do good

Because We Are Good.

“What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with thy God.”

Here Micah speaks not of an act or attitude, but of a relationship based upon a deep and abiding friendship with God. Such a relationship completely alters the focus of our lives. We no longer move from the circumference to the center, striving valiantly to do good in the misguided belief that through right behavior we will merit the favor of God.

Instead, we move from the center to the circumference, doing good because, by the grace of God, we are good. We have a goodness based, not upon what we do for God, but upon our acceptance of what God has already done for us, through Christ and his cross.

Micah did not stop with mere morality. He went on to say that while outward conduct is essential, it is dependent upon inward character. Doing is good. Loving is better. Being is best. It is the result of a deep and abiding friendship springing out of intimacy with God.

What does it mean “to walk humbly with (our) God”? For one thing, it means putting off the cloak of pretense we are prone to wear for the benefit of others and coming to Him just as we are, “poor, wretched, blind,” to find the healing which only the “poor in spirit” -- or truly humble -- can find.

It means being, but it also means becoming. To walk suggests progress. It indicates a resolute movement forward toward spiritual maturity.

Last, and most important, “to walk humbly with (our) God” means to come to the place in our spiritual growth where, “Knowing him so well, and loving him so much, we count it life’s

deepest joy to dwell in his presence.”

When we reach the level of being -- when we have no greater longing than to revel in the glory of his presence -- we will have found the final key to ultimate victory in all our doing.

Jodi, our nine-year-old, came home one day with a carton of Girl Scout cookies she was commissioned to sell. It wasn't a terribly big task, but she wanted some help. So we worked out a “sales-pitch,” and she headed off down the street. As I watched her ring the first doorbell, my mind went spinning back a good many years to my first experience in selling.

When I was nine, my dad went into full time Christian work for \$8.00 a week. Dad's meager income did not allow for a weekly allowance, so to make some “spending” money I decided to sell magazines. I never had done anything like that, and I practiced for several hours before attempting a sale.

When I had my approach “down pat,” I headed up the street, magazines in hand, and stopped at a large imposing house that looked like a good prospect. As I climbed the stairs my anxiety began to mount. By the time I got to the door my hand was shaking so much I could hardly ring the bell,. I stood there rehearsing my story when suddenly the door opened and I was confronted by the biggest, grimmest, most awesome woman I had ever seen. She so totally overwhelmed me I forgot everything I had planned to say and stuttered, “M . . . M . . Ma'am, you don't want any magazines, do you?” With a loud “No!” she slammed the door in my face. I was so “shook up” I headed straight home without making another call.

Later that evening when my father had finished work, he asked me how I'd done, and I said, “Oh, dad, I can't sell.” To which he replied, “Son, ‘can't’ never did anything. I want you to try again tomorrow, only this time I'll go with you. You walk down one side of the street, and I'll walk down the other. Before you ring each doorbell, I want you to turn around and look at me. I'll

give you a little wave and you'll do 'real good'."

The next day we set out, I in fear and trepidation, my father gently pushing me along. When we got to the first house I mounted the stairs and he crossed to the other side of the street. As I rang the doorbell, I turned around and he gave me a great big smile and a wave of the hand. Just the sight of him gave me a lift, and a smile slowly crept across my face. It was still there when the door opened, and a man looked down and said, "What are you so happy about this morning?" With a laugh I said, "I don't know, I guess I'm just lucky to be alive." "Oh, you are, are you," he said. Seeing my magazines he added, "What do you have there?"

I gave him my story and it wasn't long until I had sold him the "Saturday Evening Post," and his wife the "Ladies Home Journal." As I moved on down the street, I had similar success with other houses. Within a very short time I was sold out and floating on cloud nine!

As my father and I made our way back home, I said, "Dad, what made the difference between yesterday and today?" His answer was one I will never forget. "Son," he said, "all you needed was the assurance of a presence. You knew what to do and how to do it, but yesterday you felt all alone. Today you knew I was with you, and that's all it took."

You are like that. You need the assurance of a presence. You need to know you are not alone. And you can have the assurance of God's presence, if in your pilgrim's progress you are not content with just doing good, or even loving good, but will aim at being good, and what is more, becoming better, by walking humbly with your God.