

Study questions for

Extreme Virtues

Living on the Prophetic Edge

by David Fillingim

Sessions 1 - 4

This study guide provides teaching suggestions and group activities for eight sessions studying the book *Extreme Virtues: Living on the Prophetic Edge*. One session is devoted to the "Introduction" to the book, and one session to each of the seven virtues that comprise the focus of the seven chapters.

For each session, a responsive reading and several activities are suggested. Feel free to pick and choose among the learning activities and adapt them to the time-frame, size, and personalities of your study group.

SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION

Scripture Focus: Micah 6:1-16.

Responsive Reading: see Activity Five below. If you choose not to devote a session to the "Introduction," the reading of Micah 6:1-12 could be incorporated into the session on Responsibility, Justice, or Steadfast Love.

Activity One: Moderation?

Ask the group to think of examples of situations in life when moderation is called for and examples of situations in life when moderation is not called for. Discuss these examples and the reasons why moderation might help or hurt in the situation.

If the group has trouble coming up with examples, try this question: In considering a marriage proposal, should you plan to marry someone with whom you are moderately in love? Why or why not?

Then discuss the question: Is moderation a component of Christian commitment? Why or why not?

ActivityTwo: Who are prophets?

Ask the group, "What is a prophet?"

While the modern, common-sense meaning of the word "prophet" is "someone who predicts the future," predicting the future was not a large part of the agenda of the biblical prophets. The biblical prophets were spokespersons for God, delivering a message applying God's covenant demands to their present situation.

Ask the group to name some prophets who have been active in our lifetime. What did these prophets say and do? What was their message? What makes their message prophetic?

ActivityThree: Defining Virtues

Discuss the definition of a virtue. Ask the class what the word "virtue" means to them. Point out that a virtue is

- A positive character trait
- A personality characteristic that disposes someone to act and think in a certain positive or ethically desirable manner
- A deeply ingrained good habit

Point out that thinking about ethics in terms of virtues has a long and distinguished history. In fact, virtue lists comprise one of the primary ways that the New Testament talks about ethics, and virtue lists can be found in the Old Testament as well. A virtue list is simply that—a list of virtues. It can function as a checklist or self-test one can use to assess one's state of moral or character development. Most of the New Testament virtue lists are accompanied by vice lists—lists of behaviors and practices to avoid.

Listed below are some of the virtue lists in the Bible. Divide the class into groups to look up some of the passages, or assign each individual a passage to look up. Ask each group or individual to list the virtues in the assigned passage. Have class members report on their passages by compiling a "comprehensive" list of biblical virtues. (Some corresponding vice lists are provided in case you would like to examine them also).

Virtue Lists

Galatians 5:22-23

Ephesians 6:14-20

Colossians 3:12
James 3:17

Matthew 5:3-10

Isaiah 11:2-3

Vice Lists

Mark 7:21-22

Galatians 5:19-21

Ephesians 5:3-5

1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Colossians 3:5-9

After you have listed all the virtues, see if you can agree on a "Top 5" or "Top 10" list of Christian virtues. Discuss examples of what each virtue looks like in practice.

Activity Four: Virtues and Stories

Many virtue theorists emphasize that stories are the best way to teach virtue. Ask class members to pick a virtue from the list and think of a story of someone who embodies that virtue. The story could be a fictional story, a family story, a story of someone in your church, a story of someone in the news, an anecdote from a famous person's biography. Ask for volunteers to share the stories they've thought of and then tell which virtue(s) they illustrate.

Activity Five: A Prophetic Virtue List

Micah 6:8 is a short list of prophetic virtues, and a verse that will be mentioned several times in the book *Extreme Virtues*. It comes in the middle of a "Covenant Lawsuit" scene in the book of Micah. Spend some time exploring Micah 6 by enacting the reading below.

The Covenant Lawsuit:

A Reader's Theater Presentation of Micah 6

Introduction

The sixth chapter of the book of Micah presents the prophet's message to God's people in the form of a covenant lawsuit. The scene begins with God, through the prophet, bringing charges against the nation that they have violated the demands of covenant faithfulness (vv. 1-5). Then the people respond by sarcastically alleging that God's demands are too difficult to discern and perform (vv. 6-7). The prophet responds on God's behalf with the clear statement of God's demands in 6:8. Finally, God pronounces judgment on the nation for their failure to keep the covenant by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God (vv. 9-16).

Because these verses are written in the form of a dialogue, they can easily be adapted into a short dramatic reading. The selection below divides the words of Micah 6:1-16 into parts for the kinds of characters we would encounter in a modern courtroom. I have divided the people's defense in verses 6-7 into three parts to accommodate more readers, but these could easily be combined and read by one "defendant." I have chosen the *New Living Translation* because it flows nicely and avoids awkwardness in the Hebrew place names in most other translations.

Characters (in order of appearance)

Bailiff

Judge

Defendant 1

Defendant 2

Defendant 3

Prosecutor

The Covenant Lawsuit

Bailiff:

Listen to what the LORD is saying: "Stand up and state your case against me. Let the mountains and hills be called to witness your complaints."

And now, O mountains, listen to the LORD's complaint! He has a case against his people Israel! He will prosecute them to the full extent of the law.

Judge:

O my people, what have I done to make you turn from me? Tell me why your patience is exhausted! Answer me! For I brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from your slavery. I sent Moses, Aaron, and Miriam to help you. Don't you remember, my people, how King Balak of Moab tried to have you cursed and how Balaam son of Beor blessed

you instead? And remember your journey from Acacia to Gilgal, when I, the LORD, did everything I could to teach you about my faithfulness.

Defendant 1: What can we bring to the LORD to make up for what we've done? Should we bow before God with offerings of yearling calves?

Defendant 2: Should we offer him thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of olive oil? Would that please the LORD?

Defendant 3: Should we sacrifice our firstborn children to pay for the sins of our souls? Would that make him glad?

Prosecutor:

No, O people, the LORD has already told you what is good, and this is what he requires: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.

Bailiff:

Listen! Fear the LORD if you are wise! His voice is calling out to everyone in Jerusalem: "The armies of destruction are coming; the LORD is sending them."

Prosecutor:

Will there be no end of your getting rich by cheating? The homes of the wicked are filled with treasures gained by dishonestly measuring out grain in short measures.

Judge: And how can I tolerate all your merchants who use dishonest scales and weights?

Prosecutor:

The rich among you have become wealthy through extortion and violence. Your citizens are so used to lying that their tongues can no longer tell the truth.

Judge:

Therefore, I will wound you! I will bring you to ruin for all your sins. You will eat but never have enough. Your hunger pangs and emptiness will still remain. And though you try to save your money, it will come to nothing in the end. You will save a little, but I will give it to those who conquer you. You will plant crops but not harvest them. You will press your olives but not get enough oil to anoint yourselves. You will trample the grapes but get no juice to make your wine. The only laws you keep are those of evil King Omri; the only example you follow is that of wicked King Ahab! Therefore, I will make an example of you, bringing you to complete ruin. You will be treated with contempt, mocked by all who see you.

Activity Six: Exploring the Passage

Discuss the following:

Were you able to sense the courtroom drama in the passage?

Was this a fair trial?

Briefly define and give examples of the three virtues listed in Micah 6:8 (justice, mercy, humility). Why are these virtues important for living as God's people?

Close with prayer.

SESSION TWO: SACRIFICE

Scripture Focus: Isaiah 58:1-12

Responsive Reading: "False and True Worship" (Isaiah 58:1-12) (L=Leader, P=People)

L: Shout out, do not hold back! Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

P: Announce to my people their rebellion, to the house of Jacob their sins.

L: Yet day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways,

P: as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

L: they ask of me righteous judgments, they delight to draw near to God.

P: "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

L: Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers.

Look, you

fast only to quarrel and to fight and to strike with a wicked fist.

P: Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

L: Is such the fast that I choose, a day to humble oneself?

P: Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush, and to lie in sackcloth and ashes? Will you

call this a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD?

L: Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the

yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

P: Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your

house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

L: Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly;
 your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
**P: Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say,
 Here I am.**
 L: If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if
 you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
P: then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.
 L: The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make
 your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.
P: Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

Activity One: Exploring the Scripture

A. Introductory notes on Isaiah 58:1-12

- Probably addressed to exiles who returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity
- Sets up a "dialogue" between God and the people—the people are complaining (v. 3) because God is not honoring their fast with the blessings they were expecting, and the prophet offers God's response
- The gist of the message is that going through the motions of proper worship is not sufficient: God demand daily faithfulness.

B. Discuss the following:

- List the specific sins condemned in this passage.
- List the specific demands of God given in this passage.
- What rewards are promised for obedience in this passage?

Activity Two: Applying the lesson

A. Discuss question 1 on page 30 of *Extreme Virtues*.

- B. Have someone look up and read Luke 9:23. Then discuss the question: How can Christians resist our culture's call to self-indulgence and answer Jesus' call to self-denial and self-sacrifice instead?
- C. Discuss question 2 on p. 30 of *Extreme Virtues*.
- D. Read Philippians 2:1-11 and discuss the question: In what ways is Jesus an example for us of how to live sacrificially?

- E. Discuss the question: How should we understand the link between faithfulness and rewards?
- F. Discuss the question: What does it mean to be a "living sacrifice"?

Close by having the group read in unison the prayer on pp. 30-31 of *Extreme Virtues*.

SESSION THREE: RESPONSIBILITY

Scripture Focus: Amos 1:1-3:2

Responsive Reading: "A Confession of Responsibility" (Amos 3:1-2; Luke 12:48; Romans 12:1-2, 9-21; 14:10-13)

Note: This responsive reading combines some of the verses mentioned in the chapter on Responsibility with Paul's summary statement of Christian responsibility that concludes the argument of the letter to the Romans.

L: Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt: You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.

P: From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

L: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

P: Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,

so that you may discern what is the will of God--what is good and acceptable and perfect.

L: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

P: love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

L: Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

P: Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

L: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

P: Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

L: Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not

claim to be wiser than you are.

P: Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If

it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

L: Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written,
"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

P: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

L: Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your
brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,
"As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to
God."

P: So then, each of us will be accountable to God. Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

Activity One: Self-assessment

Discuss: After reading and hearing the catalog of responsibilities in the passages included in the responsive reading, how well do you think you are doing in living up to your responsibilities as a servant of God? How well is your church doing in instilling and living up to the responsibilities we share as people of God?

Activity Two: Exploring the Scripture

A. Introductory notes on Amos

- Amos prophesied in the eighth century B.C. and is the first of the "Classical" prophets of Israel.
- This was during the period of the Divided Monarchy when God's covenant people were split into two nations: Judah in the South was ruled by descendants of David in Jerusalem, while Israel in the North was ruled from Samaria by kings from a number of different families.
- Though Amos is a native of the southern kingdom of Judah, he prophesies in the northern kingdom of Israel.
- Biographical information about Amos is found only in 1:1 and 7:10-15, which list three occupations for Amos: shepherd, herdsman, and dresser of sycamore trees. Scholars debate whether Amos was an itinerant agricultural laborer or a landowner whose ventures included the three areas of agriculture. Either way, Amos brings a more down-to-earth, rural perspective to bear on the callousness and opulence that characterize the urban lifestyle of the capital city.
- In Amos 1:1-2:16, the "Oracles Against the Nations," Amos employs a clever strategy of condemning Israel's enemies and neighbors—including his own home

country of Judah, toward whom his northern congregation would naturally feel much resentment. Imagine a preacher entering any conservative church in America and pronouncing God's judgment on Al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, and other perceived enemies of the United States.

- But Amos doesn't stop while he's ahead. He proceeds to pronounce a harsher judgment on Israel than on their enemies. Amos 3:2 emphasizes the point: greater blessings imply greater responsibilities.

A. Discuss:

- List the specific sins Amos condemned in the nation Israel (see 2:6-12).
- What will be the punishment for these sins, according to Amos? (2:13-16)

Activity Three: Applying the lesson

A. How do Adam, Eve, Cain, and Aaron serve as examples of the human tendency to evade

responsibility?

B. Discuss question 1 on page 42 of *Extreme Virtues*.

C. Discuss question 2 on page 42 of *Extreme Virtues*.

Close by having the group read in unison the prayer on pages 42-43 of *Extreme Virtues*.

SESSION FOUR—JUSTICE

Scripture Focus: Amos 4:1-5:24

Responsive Reading: "A Call For Justice" (Amos 5:12-15, 18-24)

L: For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins—you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

P: Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.

L: Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.

P: Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

L: Alas for you who desire the day of the LORD! Why do you want the day of the LORD? It is darkness, not light;

P: as if someone fled from a lion, and was met by a bear;

L: or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall, and was bitten by a snake.

P: Is not the day of the LORD darkness, not light, and gloom with no brightness in

it?

L: I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

P: But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Activity One: Preparing for the message

Discuss: What do you think of when you hear the word "justice"?

Activity Two: Exploring the Scripture

A. Introductory notes on Amos 4:1-5:24 (*note: points 1-4 were covered in the previous session and are included here for review)

- Amos prophesied in the Eighth century B.C. and is the first of the "Classical" prophets of Israel.
- This was during the period of the Divided Monarchy when God's covenant people were split into two nations: Judah in the South was ruled by descendants of David in Jerusalem, while Israel in the North was ruled from Samaria by kings from a number of different families.
- Though Amos is a native of the southern kingdom of Judah, he prophesies in the northern kingdom of Israel.
- Biographical information about Amos is found only in 1:1 and 7:10-15, which list three occupations for Amos: shepherd, herdsman, and dresser of sycamore trees. Scholars debate whether Amos was an itinerant agricultural laborer or a landowner whose ventures included the three areas of agriculture. Either way, Amos brings a more down-to-earth, rural perspective to bear on the callousness and opulence that characterize the urban lifestyle of the capital city.
- Amos 4:1-3 is a scathing indictment of the opulence of Samaria, comparing the wives of the leading citizens to cows who grow fat at the expense of the poor.
- Amos 5:1-5 predicts the punishment for Israel's sins. This prediction was fulfilled about a generation later when the Assyrians destroyed Samaria in 722 B.C.
- In Amos 5:18-19, we see the nation's utter lack of awareness of their situation. They are expecting "the day of the LORD" to come soon as a day of judgment against their enemies. Amos points out that it is Israel who will be judged.
- In Amos 4:4-5 and 5:21-24 we see again that proper religious ceremony is not sufficient. God demands daily faithfulness in terms of justice for the poor.

B. Discuss:

- List the specific sins condemned by Amos (see 4:1 and 5:10-12)
- What does God demand instead? (see 5:14-15 and 5:24)

Activity Three: Applying the lesson

A. Go over these definitions of the three types of justice:

- **Retributive justice** means receiving what is due as a result of one's actions.
- **Distributive justice** means distributing the things that make up the good life among the members of society according to criteria such as merit or need.
- **Restorative justice** means taking concrete action to restore the marginalized and outcast to full membership and participation in the life of the community.

Discuss: Which of these three definitions paints the fullest picture of the type of justice God demands that we show in our lives and relationships?

A. Why do you think so many Christians in North America are guilty of the callousness towards the poor that produces injustice? How can Christians resist the forces that produce such callousness?

B. Discuss question 6 on p. 58 of *Extreme Virtues*.

C. Discuss questions 4 and 5 on p. 58 of *Extreme Virtues*.

Close by having the group read in unison the prayer on pp. 58-59 of *Extreme Virtues*.