

Several years ago, a song was released by the contemporary Christian band Casting Crowns. It was called “Courageous,” and it was a pretty big hit. If you've ever listened to Christian radio, you've probably heard the song played at some point. And it was released alongside a Christian movie of the same name that we actually watched down in our fellowship hall after the church picnic a couple years ago.

The song is a call to arms for Christians. Particularly for Christian men. Who have for too long relinquished their place as spiritual leaders in their families and communities. And, instead, have sat on the sidelines. Making excuses for why they didn't have the courage to have the physical and spiritual self-control necessary to be godly men.

It's a good song. The theme comes from the very Biblical idea of being a soldier for the Lord. It draws upon a rather ancient Christian tradition in our music and hymnody of singing about the Church Militant. The Church called by God to fight the good fight of faith.

And if you know the song, you know that the bridge directly quotes our Old Testament lesson for today. *“He has told you, O man, 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?”*

In the song, the statement is presented as a simple formula for correcting the problems with the Church today. God has laid it out in basic terms. Seek justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God. They repeat it over and over again. As if all we need to do is pound it into our heads just a few more times.

They even overlap it with the encouragement that faithfulness is simply a war of the mind. A battle of the heart and of the hand. What should we think? Justice. What should we feel? Mercy. What should we do? Walk humbly with our God.

And as much as I really do love this song, and as much as they are absolutely right about what it means to be good, there's just one little problem here. And that is that they've completely missed the point of Micah chapter six verse eight.

Because this passage is not actually a word of encouragement to us. No, it's a word of condemnation. God is crushing his people under the full weight of the Law.

You see, Micah is writing just before the fall of Judah to the Babylonians. Just before they are to be put into exile. And this passage involves God putting his people on trial. Inviting them to convince Him why they shouldn't be punished for their sinfulness.

And so He lays out His side of the case. Look at all I've done for you. I brought you out of Egypt. I gave you leaders like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. I rescued you from King Balak's army. I thwarted the plans of Balaam. I gave you victory after victory, from north to south. From the city of Shittim to the city of Gilgal. There is nothing that I haven't done for you.

And what did I ask in return? Seek justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God. That's it. Three little things. So simple, they fit in the bridge of a pop song. And yet what have you done?

You've sinned. Time and time again, you've sinned. You didn't seek justice. You didn't love mercy. You didn't walk humbly with your God. You never could. And instead of admitting your sinfulness. Instead of simply coming to me in repentance and saying, “God, I'm sorry.” You've sat there coming up with ways to buy my love and grace.

*“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? 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 olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

What do you want God? Let's make a deal! What will make this right? A burnt offering at the temple, maybe? How about a one year old calf; prime veal? Still not enough? How about a thousand rams; a lifetime of offerings? Ten thousand rivers of olive oil; a treasure that's worth millions? My own son, God! How about that?! I'll give you anything! Just don't make me admit that I'm a sinner.

We try and we try to convince ourselves that we've covered up what we did wrong. That an extra large offering in the plate will cover up the spiteful words we spoke to our neighbors. That if we're just a better mother or father at home, it will cover up the way we've failed to bring God's Word to our family and friends. That if we're just a better husband or wife, it will cover up the way that we've put people and possessions ahead of God our entire lives. If we're just courageous this one time, we won't have to admit that we've spent a lifetime as a coward.

Which is ironic, really. Because this guilt and shame we feel inside when we compare ourselves to God's standard was intended to show us where we went wrong. It was a gift to us. A mirror on our sinful lives to help identify our sin. To move us to repentance.

And yet, even in that, we find a way to use a good gift of God to deceive and separate ourselves from him. The fact of the matter is, the more we try to become better, the less we become good.

And good is what God expects. Good is what God himself is. And good is what he has indeed shown us in his Son. A man who acted with such perfect justice that those who accused him of crimes could find no fault with Him. A man who loved with such incredible mercy that he handed himself over to whips and scorn on our behalf. A man who walked with such utter humility, that he gave up his own life at His Father's command.

God has told you, O man, what is good. But then the LORD has done what was required of us. And it wasn't a burnt offering of a yearling calf. It wasn't a thousand rams. It wasn't ten thousand rivers of oil. It was his firstborn. God has given his firstborn for our transgressions. The fruit of his substance – God of God, light of light, very God of very God – offered for the sin of your soul.

Because, you see, in that one aspect our gut reaction to our sin is dead on. Our sin needs to be covered by goodness and righteousness. It needs to be buried under a mountain of good deeds. But nothing we could do would ever be enough. Not a thousand rams or ten thousand rivers of olive oil. Not a million dollars in the offering plate or a thousand years of service in the church.

No, nothing could cover that sin, except the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross. We acted unjustly. He acted justly. We loved scorn. He loved mercy. We strutted around with pride. He walked humbly with our God. We were cowards, but he had the courage to be crucified for us.

We were made to be courageous. But we weren't. We aren't. As long as sinful mortal flesh weighs us down, we will never truly be the courageous soldiers God wants us to be. But thanks be to God, through the death of his firstborn, we are reborn to be courageous.

That's what baptism is: a rebirth. We are reborn of water and the Spirit to have a right spirit within us. In baptism, we are reborn into the image of God's courageous son.

Who told us and who showed us what is good. And fills us with the courage to be His people. Courage not found in human strength or human wisdom or a human heart. But found in confessing our sinfulness and hearing His forgiveness.

We were made to be courageous. But we weren't. We aren't. But thankfully, the song doesn't end there. No, the final plea of that refrain is a prayer: Lord, make us courageous. And that's exactly what he does in Baptism. That's exactly what he does through this Supper. That's exactly what he does through his Word to us today.

He fills us with courage. The courage to daily be more like his Son. The courage to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. The courage to lay down our lives for our neighbor. Just as he laid down his life for us. Amen.