# SUNDAY SCHOOL FEBRUARY 1, 2026

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## Old Testament: Micah 6:1-8

***Context: Micah 6:1-8 is framed like a courtroom scene: God calls Israel to account, reminds them of His faithfulness, and then boils true religion down to three simple, demanding practices: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.***

### GOD CHALLENGES ISRAEL

Hear what the Lord says:
Rise, plead your case before the mountains,
and let the hills hear your voice.
Hear, you mountains, the case of the Lord,
and you enduring foundations of the earth,
for the Lord has a case against his people,
and he will contend with Israel.

"O my people, what have I done to you?
In what have I wearied you? Answer me!
For I brought you up from the land of Egypt
and redeemed you from the house of slavery,
and I sent before you Moses,
Aaron, and Miriam.
O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised,
what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the saving acts of the Lord."

### WHAT GOD REQUIRES

"With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"
He has told you, O mortal, 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?

## OVERVIEW

Micah 6:1-8 is one of the Bible's clearest "spiritual reset buttons." It challenges a religious instinct that says, "If I just bring the right offering, God will be satisfied," and replaces it with a relational, ethical standard: God wants a life shaped by justice, steadfast love, and humility, not religious performance.

The passage moves in three beats:

- **God's case (6:1-5):** "I have not wronged you; I delivered you; I guided you."
- **The people's anxious bargaining (6:6-7):** "What do you want? Burnt offerings? Thousands of rams? Even my firstborn?"
- **God's plain answer (6:8):** "You already know: justice, mercy, humility."

## BIBLICAL CONTEXT

### What comes immediately before (Micah 5)

Micah 5 contains both warning and hope:

- It speaks of national humiliation and conflict (a battered people and threatened leadership).
- It also contains a famous hope-note about a ruler from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) and a vision of peace and security under God's shepherding rule.
  So by the time we reach Micah 6, the message is not "God is done with you," but "God is calling you back to the covenant path."

### What comes immediately after (Micah 6:9-16 and beyond)

Right after 6:1-8, the tone hardens into specifics:

- God condemns **dishonest business practices**, violence, and deceit (6:9-16).
- Then Micah 7 becomes a lament about society's moral breakdown, followed by hope in God's mercy and restoration (7:18-20).
  So 6:8 is not a bumper-sticker; it is a summary that immediately gets applied to real-world economics, power, and integrity.

### The broader narrative and theology of Micah (the whole book)

Micah is often organized in three cycles of warning/hope:

- **Chapters 1-2:** Judgment for injustice; hope for regathering.
- **Chapters 3-5:** Judgment on corrupt leaders/prophets; hope for a future shepherd-king and peace.
- **Chapters 6-7:** A covenant lawsuit exposing spiritual hypocrisy; ending with hope in God's forgiving character.

Big theological themes:

- **Covenant faithfulness:** God has been faithful; His people have not.
- **Justice as true worship:** Worship that ignores exploitation is empty.
- **Hope beyond failure:** Judgment is real, but mercy has the final word (Micah 7:18 is one of the strongest mercy statements in the OT).

## HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

Micah prophesied in Judah during a time of massive political pressure and social stratification (the world of powerful empires pushing around smaller kingdoms). Internally, wealth and land were being concentrated, and the poor were getting squeezed.

Key dynamics behind Micah's message:

- **Religious activity continued** (sacrifices, festivals, "God-talk"), but it could become cover for injustice.
- **Leadership corruption:** Micah repeatedly targets rulers, judges, and religious spokespeople who benefit from the system.
- **Economic exploitation:** Think land grabs, rigged courts, predatory lending, dishonest scales, and "legal" theft with religious justification.

Micah 6 uses a covenant lawsuit form (common in the ancient world): a ruler or deity "brings charges," recounts past benefits, and names the breach. ***The point is: God is not vague here. He is prosecuting hypocrisy.***

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **Micah's ministry:** Traditionally placed in the late 8th century BC (during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah in Judah).
- **Key regional events in the background:**
  - Assyria rises as the dominant superpower.
  - The Northern Kingdom (Israel) collapses to Assyria (722 BC), intensifying fear, refugees, and instability in the region.
  - Judah lives under threat and political pressure, often tempted to "solve" problems with alliances, bribes, and internal crackdowns. Micah speaks into that environment: when people feel threatened, they often tighten fists (economically, socially), and they sometimes try to buy God off

## BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

**Original language and dating**

- Micah is primarily **Hebrew** prophetic poetry and rhetoric, with sharp wordplay and legal imagery.
- Micah 6:1-8 is especially stylized: courtroom summons, witness imagery (mountains/hills), and concise ethical imperatives.

**Major stages of English translation (quick, practical arc)**

- **Early foundations:** Hebrew text preserved by Jewish scribal tradition (later standardized as the Masoretic Text).
- **Greek translation:** The Septuagint (LXX) shaped early Christian reading, sometimes influencing how phrases were heard.
- **English tradition:** From early English versions to the KJV, then modern translations that vary between word-for-word and thought-for-thought approaches. For Micah 6:8, most mainstream translations land very similarly, because the Hebrew is strikingly direct.

**Theologically significant translation choices in 6:8**

- **"Justice"**
  Not just "being fair in your personal opinions." It is concrete: right ordering in community life, especially for those with less power.
- **"Mercy / kindness / steadfast love"**
  This translation is loaded. It can mean kindness, covenant loyalty, faithful love. "Mercy" isn't only a feeling; it is loyal, active care rooted in covenant faithfulness.
- **"Walk humbly" (often tied to a sense like "walk carefully" or "walk wisely")**
  The idea is not performative self-hate. It is a grounded posture: living in step with God without swagger, without using religion as status.
- ***"What does the LORD require of you?"***
  "Require" here lands like a covenant expectation, not a random demand. God is saying, "This is what our relationship has always meant."

## SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

If Micah 6:1-8 is a courtroom, the "witnesses" (mountains and hills) are like the long memory of creation saying: "We've seen this pattern for generations."

Metaphorically, this passage confronts **the human urge to substitute transactions for transformation**:

- "What if I give more?" (money)
- "What if I perform more?" (religion)
- "What if I prove I'm serious?" (grand gestures)

Micah says God is not shopping for religious receipts. God is looking for a **community ethic**.

Grant County translation (modern parallels without making it partisan):

- **Justice:** How are people treated when they have less leverage? In housing, wages, school discipline, courtroom outcomes, access to transportation, addiction recovery, disability support, and basic dignity at the counter of daily life.
- **Steadfast love:** Not "nice when convenient," but loyal care that sticks. The kind of neighbor-love that shows up again next week, not just at Christmas.
- **Humility:** A community posture that says, "We might be wrong; we will listen; we will not assume moral superiority." That lands directly on the kind of religious superiority trap you have been naming in class: "We're right, so we're done listening."

One strong modern metaphor: **Micah is calling out spiritual outsourcing.** We try to outsource goodness to offerings, attendance, slogans, and certainty. God says: "Bring your whole life. Bring how you treat people."

## HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Stop bargaining with God.** If your faith is mostly "What do I need to do to be OK?" Micah gently but firmly redirects you: live the way God has been teaching all along.
- **Make justice specific.** Pick one concrete "dishonest scale" in your world (literal finances, workplace fairness, gossip, how you talk about outsiders, how decisions get made) and correct it.

- **Practice Steadfast Love as a habit.** Choose steady, repeatable mercy: check on the shut-in, keep showing up for the struggling family, support recovery efforts that take time, forgive without keeping score.
- **Adopt humility as a spiritual discipline.** In conversations, ask: "What might I be missing?" Humility keeps faith from becoming a weapon.
- **Measure worship by the fruit it produces.** If worship makes us more judgmental, more harsh, and more self-satisfied, something is off. If worship makes us kinder, braver, fairer, and more patient, we are getting warmer.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Where do you see the "bargaining impulse" today (trying to trade religion for security, certainty, or moral superiority)?*
- *When you hear "do justice," do you think personal fairness, public systems, or both? What examples come to mind locally?*
- *What does "walk humbly with your God" look like in a disagreement (politics, doctrine, parenting, money, church conflicts)?*
- *If Micah 6:8 were the scorecard, how would we measure our church's health beyond attendance and offerings?*
- *What is one small, concrete action each of us could take this week that fits justice, mercy, or humility?*
- *Do Sacrifices matter? Sacrifices mattered — God gave them. But Micah is saying sacrifices were never meant to replace how we treat people. They were meant to reflect it. The problem wasn't the sacrifices. The problem was thinking they could cancel out injustice."*
- *Did God clearly command offerings? Absolutely. And Micah is reminding people that God never wanted worship without character. It's not either/or — it's order. Character first, worship flowing from it.*
- ***Isn't this just works-based faith? God doesn't say do these things so I'll love you. He says, I already loved you and delivered you — now live like it." Micah isn't about earning God's favor; it's about living out gratitude.***
- *This sounds like social justice, not faith. In the Bible, justice isn't political first — it's relational. It's about how God's people treat neighbors, workers, strangers, and the vulnerable. Micah isn't borrowing a modern idea. Modern conversations borrowed it from Micah.*
- ***So, what does God actually want from us? Not perfection. Not religious performance. God wants people whose faith shows up in fairness, kindness, and humility. Micah reminds us that God is less interested in how loudly we worship Him and more interested in how faithfully we reflect Him.***
- *If someone watched our lives all week but never heard our theology, what would they learn about God?*

## Gospel: Matthew 5:1-12

***Context: Today we hear the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, where He names who is truly "blessed" in God's kingdom - not the powerful, but the humble, the hurting, the merciful, and the peacemakers.***

### THE BEATITUDES

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

### OVERVIEW

Matthew 5:1-12 is the Beatitudes - Jesus' opening "vision statement" for life in the Kingdom of Heaven. He overturns normal status markers (wealth, strength, applause) and declares God's favor on people the world often overlooks: the poor in spirit, the grieving, the meek, the hungry for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and the persecuted.

***This is not a list of "how to earn heaven." It's a description of what God's life looks like when it takes root in real people - and a promise that God is especially near to those who know their need.***

### BIBLICAL CONTEXT

**Immediately before (Matthew 4:23-25)**

> Jesus has begun His public ministry in Galilee: teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing. Crowds gather from many regions. The Beatitudes come as the first major block of Jesus' teaching - the "what this kingdom is like" after we've seen "what this kingdom does" (heals, restores, gathers).

**Immediately after (Matthew 5:13-16)**

Right after the Beatitudes, Jesus calls His followers "salt" and "light." In other words: the Beatitudes aren't private spirituality; they are public witness. The inner posture becomes outward impact.

**Broader Matthew context (book-level)**

Matthew presents Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah and a teacher like Moses - but greater. The Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7) functions like a new "Torah-shaped" teaching: not abolishing the Law, but fulfilling it by driving toward the heart (anger under murder, lust under adultery, integrity under oaths, love under retaliation). The Beatitudes are the front door: they frame righteousness as a transformed life, not a performance.

## HISTORICAL / NON-BIBLICAL / POLITICAL CONTEXT

- **Roman-occupied Judea/Galilee:** Many Jews lived under heavy taxation, land pressure, and the daily humiliation of occupation. "Blessed are the meek" and "blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" land in a world where justice often feels like a luxury item.
- **Honor/shame culture:** Public status mattered. Jesus' list blesses people with low social "honor" - the grieving, the powerless, the merciful (often seen as "soft"), and those rejected for faithfulness.
- **Competing Jewish responses:** Some groups leaned toward separation (purity boundaries), others toward resistance, others toward collaboration. Jesus' opening emphasis on mercy, purity of heart, and peacemaking signals a kingdom that is neither passive nor violent - it's morally serious and socially disruptive.

## HISTORICAL TIMELINE / BIBLICAL TIMEFRAME

- **Event timeframe:** Jesus' Galilean ministry, early in His public work - commonly placed around **late 20s AD** (often ~27-30 AD).
- **Gospel timeframe:** Matthew is commonly dated **somewhere between ~70-90 AD** (scholars debate the exact year), written for a community deeply engaged with Jewish Scripture and identity after the trauma of the Jewish-Roman war and the destruction of the Temple (70 AD). That backdrop makes "persecution" and "comfort" feel very immediate.

## BIBLE TRANSLATION UNDERSTANDING

**Original language + key words**

Matthew is preserved in **Greek**. A few loaded terms in the Beatitudes:

- **"Blessed":** More than "happy." It's closer to "favored," "flourishing under God," or "in a life-position that is held by God." It can include joy, but it isn't dependent on circumstances.
- **"Poor in spirit":** This means extreme poverty - not "lower middle class." "In spirit" points to inner posture: spiritual bankruptcy, dependence, humility before God (not self-sufficiency).
- **"Meek":** Not weak. Often "gentle strength," power under control. (Think: the opposite of bullying.)
- **"Righteousness":** Can mean personal holiness *and* justice/rightness in relationships and society. Matthew uses this word a lot - it's a major theme.
- **"Merciful":** Not sentimental. Mercy that acts - forgiveness, compassion, practical care.

- **“Pure in heart”:** Inner integrity, not just ritual cleanliness.
- **“Persecuted”:** To pursue/harass. Not mild inconvenience - real social cost.

**Major stages of English translation (fast-and-useful)**

- **Early English:** Wycliffe (from Latin), then **Tyndale** (from Greek), shaping familiar phrasing.
- **KJV tradition (1611):** Influential cadence; “Blessed are…” becomes deeply embedded in English-speaking Christianity.
- **Modern translations (20th-21st c.):** Draw on older manuscripts and updated English. Some render “blessed” as “happy,” but many keep “blessed” because “happy” can sound shallow compared to the Greek weight.

  Theologically significant translation tension: if “blessed” becomes “happy,” readers can mishear Jesus as describing emotions. But Jesus is announcing God’s favor and future promises even when emotions are heavy.

## SCHOLARLY METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION WITH MODERN-DAY & GRANT COUNTY CONTEXT

Think of the Beatitudes as Jesus flipping the scoreboard.

Our world - and honestly, a lot of small-town life too - keeps score with visible stats: steady job, good reputation, tough skin, “don’t need help,” keep your business private, win the argument, stand your ground.

Jesus’ kingdom scoreboard looks different:

- **“Poor in spirit”** is the person who stops pretending they’re fine. Spiritually, emotionally, relationally: “God, I can’t muscle my way through this.” In a Grant County frame, that might be the quiet humility of someone who’s been through layoffs, addiction in the family, medical bills, or grief - and finally admits, “I need help.”
- **“Those who mourn”** includes grief over loss *and* grief over what’s broken in the world. It blesses the people who still have a tender conscience - who haven’t numbed out.
- **“Meek”** is strength that refuses to become harsh. The person who could “put somebody in their place,” but chooses restraint, dignity, and steady character.
- **“Hunger and thirst for righteousness”** is longing for things to be put right: families healed, systems fair, truth spoken without cruelty, accountability without humiliation.
- **“Merciful / pure in heart / peacemakers”** describes a community capable of disagreement without contempt - where people can be honest and still humane.

Metaphorically: the Beatitudes describe the **shape of a healed human**. Jesus isn’t romanticizing suffering; He’s declaring that God is closest to people who are open, teachable, compassionate, and courageous enough to live by love in a hard world.

## HOW SHOULD WE ACT AND REACT TO THIS SCRIPTURE TODAY?

- **Don’t treat the Beatitudes like a ladder to climb** (“If I do these, God will reward me”). Treat them like a **portrait** Jesus paints of kingdom life - and an invitation to become that kind of person.
- **Practice “poverty of spirit” on purpose:** simple prayers like “God, I need You,” and honest self-assessment without self-hatred.

- **Make room for mourning:** don't rush people past grief; don't baptize denial as faith. Comfort often comes through presence, not explanations.
- **Choose meekness as a strength:** speak truth without cruelty; set boundaries without contempt.
- **Hunger for righteousness without turning into a crusader:** pursue what's right while staying merciful - especially when you have power in a situation.
- **Be a peacemaker, not a peacekeeper:** peacekeeping avoids conflict; peacemaking does the brave work of reconciliation, confession, repair, and truth-telling.
- **Expect some pushback:** if your faith makes you more merciful, more honest, and less tribal, somebody will call it naive. Jesus says you're not off-track - you're near the heart of the kingdom.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- *Which Beatitude feels the most natural to you? Which feels the hardest? Why?*
- *Why do you think Jesus begins His longest teaching by talking about humility, grief, mercy, and peacemaking instead of rules or commands?*
- *What does "poor in spirit" look like in everyday life — not in church language, but real life?*
- *How is being "meek" different from being weak? Can you think of a time when restraint took more strength than aggression?*
- *Which Beatitude do you think our culture struggles with the most? Why?*
- *If someone watched how we treat others all week, which Beatitude would they most clearly see in us?*
- *If Jesus is describing people who are already "blessed" — before they fix anything, achieve anything, or prove anything — what does that tell us about how God's favor actually works?*

## CLOSING CONSIDERATIONS

*The Beatitudes don't tell us how to earn God's favor. They tell us where God already is — especially among people who know they need Him.*

*The Beatitudes sound less like a reward system and more like a reassurance — that God meets people where they are, not where they think they should be.*

# Addendum

## Predestination

1. **Is it in the Bible that our "destination is written on our soul at birth" — even for babies?**

   **Short answer:**
   *No verse says that directly.*
   But there **are** passages that people often *mean* when they say this.

   **Scriptures people usually point to (or imply)**

   **Psalm 139:13–16**

   "You knit me together in my mother's womb… all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

   - This speaks to **God's foreknowledge**, not explicitly to eternal salvation or damnation.
   - "Days" ≠ "heaven or hell."
   - ***Many scholars read this as poetic assurance of God's care, not a metaphysical map of destiny.***

   **Jeremiah 1:5**

   "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you…"

   - About **Jeremiah's prophetic calling**, not all humans.
   - This is vocation, not salvation.

   **Ephesians 1:4–5**

   "He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world…"

   - This is the **strongest predestination language** in the New Testament.
   - But note: *"in Christ"* — corporate, communal language, not individual soul-labeling at birth.

   **Romans 8:29–30**

   "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined…"

   - Again, heavily theological language — but Paul never says *when* or *how* this applies to individuals, infants, or souls at birth.

   **What Scripture does not say**

   - It never says babies are born with heaven or hell "written on their soul."
   - It never describes salvation as biologically or metaphysically fixed at birth.
   - It never removes human response, faith, or transformation from the equation.

   **Bottom line:**
   *The Bible speaks of **God's foreknowledge and purpose**, not of a* prewritten spiritual barcode *stamped on newborns.*

2. **So where does this idea come from?**

   This language usually comes from **Reformed theology**, especially ideas associated with **John Calvin**.

   Calvin emphasized:

   - God's absolute sovereignty
   - God's initiative in salvation
   - Human inability to "earn" salvation

   From this grew the doctrine commonly summarized as predestination.

   But here's the key nuance often missed:

   **Calvin did not talk about "souls having destinations written on them."** He talked about God's sovereign *choice*, not mystical inscriptions.

3. **Is predestination a Presbyterian belief?**

   Yes — *but not in the way many people think.*

   Presbyterians come from the **Reformed tradition**, shaped by Calvin, but modern Presbyterian theology is **much more nuanced**.

   **What Presbyterians generally affirm**

   In broad strokes (especially in **Presbyterian Church (USA)**:

   - God takes the **initiative** in salvation
   - Grace comes **before** human response
   - Salvation is not earned

   **What most Presbyterians do not teach today**

   - That individuals are born "marked" for heaven or hell
   - That babies are condemned or saved apart from God's mercy
   - That human choice, growth, or faith are meaningless

   Many modern Presbyterians interpret predestination as:

   **God's unwavering commitment to redeem**, not a fixed list of winners and losers.

   Karl Barth (hugely influential in Presbyterian circles) reframed predestination as:

   - God chooses **Jesus**
   - Humanity is chosen *in Christ*
   - The emphasis is hope, not exclusion

4. **Some final words:**

   The Bible does talk about God knowing us deeply — even before birth — and about God's purposes not being random. But it never says that babies are born with heaven or hell already written on their souls.

Christians have debated how God's foreknowledge and human response work together for centuries — and different traditions emphasize different parts of that mystery

That's a powerful image — but it's more theological language than a direct biblical quote. Scripture tends to hold God's sovereignty *and* human response in tension, rather than locking destiny in place at birth.

**This belief can quietly lead to:**

- **Fatalism ("what's the point?")**
- **Moral passivity**
- **Anxiety about loved ones**
- **A harsh view of God's justice**

## *Whereas Scripture consistently emphasizes:*

- ***God's mercy***
- ***Transformation***
- ***Calling***
- ***Invitation***
- ***Growth***

### Who Do We Listen To — and Why Do We Trust Them?

Something else worth noticing is *where* our ideas come from. A lot of things sound biblical because they've been said in church settings for a long time — but that doesn't always mean they come *from* the Bible itself.

1. **Is it a direct quote, or a theological summary?**
    - Scripture and interpretation are not the same thing.
    - Both matter — but they should not be confused.
2. **Who taught us this — and from what tradition?**
    - Many beliefs are inherited from pastors, denominations, study Bibles, or Christian radio.
    - None of those are neutral.
3. **Does this idea sound more like certainty… or like mystery?**
    - The Bible often speaks with **tension** rather than final answers.
    - When something removes all tension, it's worth slowing down.

Christians don't all read Scripture the same way — and they never have. That's not a failure of faith; it's part of being human readers of an ancient text. Sometimes we trust ideas because they were said confidently, repeatedly, or by someone we respect — not because we've actually seen them in Scripture.

*Not to mention "context" and timeline, which we've talked about before and why we now have "before" and "after" scripture research.*

***This frames** discernment **as faithfulness, not skepticism. Faith isn't just about* what *we believe — it's also about* how *we learn to believe it, and who we've learned to trust along the way.***

## If You're Not a Christian

Is our God cruel?

The bigger question is why it matters to us that God judges others … and how that manifests in our own judgments of others.

What is the ***"Bible says so"*** mentality? For instance, "The Bible is clear that if you don't believe that Jesus is the son of God, then you'll not get to heaven." Is there an underlying meaning of "my religion is better than yours"?

I once heard of a way to think about God was that God was in the center of a wheel with all the spokes around the wheel led to God from different religions. Meaning, all the same God.

***Another thought is that all the Abrahamic religions started with the same God (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and so that's the same God. Jesus, himself, was a Jew and evidently a Jewish scholar, which means his God was the Judaism God. Thoughts?***

Let's discuss:

1. **"The Bible is clear…" — is it, though?**

   The statement *"If you don't believe Jesus is the Son of God, you won't get to heaven"* **does exist** in Christian theology, especially drawing from passages like John 14:6 or John 3:16. But here's a quieter truth:

   **The Bible is clear about allegiance to Christ — it is far less clear about God's limits.**

   Scripture repeatedly tells us *who Jesus is* and *who Christians are called to follow*. It does **not** give us a detailed map of who God refuses to love, save, or reach.

   In fact, the Bible is remarkably restrained about declaring who is *out*. Humans do that far more eagerly than God does.

2. **The "wheel and spokes" idea — not heretical, actually**

   It's not saying *"all religions are the same."*
   It's saying:

   **Human approaches to God differ, but God is not fragmented.**

   From a biblical standpoint, this resonates with verses like:

   - "In Him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28)
   - "God is not far from any one of us" (Acts 17:27)

   Paul says this *to pagans*, not believers — and he does **not** start by condemning their framework.

3. **Abrahamic faiths: same God, different covenants**

   Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all trace themselves back to **Abraham**. They differ profoundly — especially about Jesus — but they are not worshiping different creator gods.

   - Jews worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
   - Christians worship the God of Abraham, revealed through Christ
   - Muslims worship the God of Abraham, whom they call Allah

***Christians may believe others misunderstand God — but misunderstanding is not the same as inventing a false deity.***

4. **Jesus was Jewish — and that matters more than we admit**

   **Jesus** was:

   - Born Jewish
   - Taught in Jewish synagogues
   - Quoted Hebrew Scripture constantly
   - Engaged in Jewish interpretive debates

   Many of His sharpest critiques were aimed not at unbelievers, but at religious insiders who believed: "We are right — therefore we are righteous."

   Sound familiar?

5. **"My religion is better than yours" vs "My way helps me follow God"**

   Christian faith, at its best, says: "This is how I have encountered God, grace, forgiveness, and transformation."

   It gets distorted when it becomes: "Because this worked for me, God must reject everyone else."

   Jesus consistently framed faith as **invitation**, not dominance.

   ***He called people to follow — not to rank themselves above others.***

## Transactional Theology

A few more thoughts for this line of thinking, which goes back to conversations we've had before. That is ... ***"Good deeds are not transactional."*** Do we still feel that heaven is the reward for doing good. What I think is work considering is should we be doing good to be doing good? And, from my perspective, there is still an underlying judgmental mentality ... the thinking that our religion (Christianity) is so superior that others will never get to heaven. ***What I'd like to stress is that it's not up to us.***

1. **"Good deeds are not transactional" — looking at it Biblically**
   I'm not pushing against Scripture here. I feel I'm echoing one of its most consistent tensions.

   The transactional mindset says:

   *If I do X, God gives me Y.*

   The biblical witness — especially in Jesus — says something closer to:

   *Because God has already acted, I am free to live differently.*

   That's a **shift from earning to becoming**.

   Jesus does not say:

   - "Be good so you can get into the Kingdom."

   He says:

   - "The Kingdom of God is at hand — therefore live like this."

   ***Goodness isn't a currency. It's a fruit.***

   That's why Paul struggles so hard to explain grace, and why James insists that faith *shows up* in action. They are not arguing about the transaction; they're arguing about **what a transformed life looks like**.

2. **Heaven as a "reward" subtly shrinks God – THIS IS TOM'S OPINION. THIS IS NOT BIBLICAL (kind of). Take it or leave it. I'm OK with differing opinions.**

   When heaven becomes the prize for good behavior, God slowly turns into:

   - An accountant,
   - a moral vending machine,
   - or a final judge tallying points.

   But biblically, heaven is not presented as a *payment*. It's described as:

   - **union**
   - **restoration**
   - **belonging**
   - **life with God**

   ***If heaven is the reward, goodness becomes strategic.***
   ***If God is the goal, goodness becomes* natural.**

3. **“Do good to be good” is not secular — it’s Jesus-shaped**

   What I’m trying to say is very close to: “Love your neighbor.”

   Jesus never adds: “…so that you’ll be rewarded later.”

   In fact, He regularly *undermines* reward-based thinking:

   - Love enemies
   - Give without expecting return
   - Pray in secret
   - Don’t announce your generosity

   Why? Because once goodness becomes a means to an end, **it stops being goodness**.

   That’s not moral relativism. That’s moral maturity.

4. **The judgmental reflex: “We can’t help ourselves”**

   Judgment feels like faithfulness when faith has been framed as certainty and boundary-keeping. BUT…

   ***“That’s not up to us.”***

   Biblically, humans are called to witness, love, serve, follow.
   **Judgment belongs to God alone — and Scripture is remarkably consistent on that point.**