

“That Hard?”

Micah 6: 1-8

It shouldn't be that hard, should it? Should it be that hard for us to live good lives? Lives that meet God's requirements? Well, let's think about that, today. Maybe today's Scripture lesson will help us solve that one.

The words we have in the Scripture from Micah seem to make up a conversation. First, the Prophet Micah introduces what is to come, then God speaks to God's Chosen people, the people of Israel.

“Dear people, how have I done you wrong?
Have I burdened you, worn you out? Answer!
I delivered you from a bad life in Egypt;
I paid a good price to get you out of slavery.
I sent Moses to lead you—
and Aaron and Miriam to boot!
Remember what Balak King of Moab tried to pull,
and how Balaam son of Beor turned the tables on him.
Remember all those stories about Shittim and Gilgal.
Keep all God's salvation stories fresh and present.”
(Micah 6: 3-5, The Message version of the Bible.)

God was reminding the people of all the grace and help and even miracles they had received from God. God wants the people to know the “saving acts of the Lord.”

Then, in reply, one of the Chosen People replies:
“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?” (Micah 6: 6-7)

This person's idea is to give offerings to God, offerings that get bigger and bigger every minute. Burnt offerings! Year-old calves! How about thousands of sheep? Or ten thousands of RIVERS of oil?

These offerings which are suggested are much, much expanded beyond the required and traditional offerings set out earlier in the Bible.

Yet, would it even be possible for one person, or even all the Chosen People to sacrifice that much livestock from their farms and herds? Would it be possible to have a river's worth of olive oil, much less ten thousands of them?

The person giving this answer is thinking that whatever he does, to please God, or the people do, it has to be grand and glorious. He is also thinking there is only one way about it, giving sacrifices.

That reminds me of a joke. George and Martha were having some marital problems. So they go see a marriage counselor. Martha says that the problem is that George is always at work. She never sees him, the kids never see him. They all miss him so badly. Can the counselor help with this?

The counselor turns to George and says, "Well, you can see that Martha is not happy with how things are. What do you think you should do?"

George thinks a minute, then says, "I guess I will just have to work harder at my job at work."

Of course, Martha is ready to scream, but the counselor makes her sit down and take a few breaths.

You see, the only thing George knows he is supposed to do is work and provide for the family. He didn't know they really needed his time and companionship as well.

In the same way, the person in the Scripture only knows how to please God with offerings and sacrifices. So, he offers to do more, like George in the joke did, only a thousand times worse. He even goes so far as to offer the sacrifice of a child.

That could not be more wrong! The pagan peoples did exactly that, at the time. They did sacrifice children. God did and does condemn that as evil.

As it happens, the absence of such sacrifices was what the Chosen People, and later the Christians were known for, back then. They were known for not sacrificing children, and for even going out to rescue unwanted babies who had been left on hillsides.

Back to the Scripture. Then, the Prophet Micah comes back into the conversation. He has told you! God has told you what is good to do!

“and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” Three things: justice, kindness, and humility with God.

Justice can be defined as “preserving the rights of all in the community.” (Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Prophets I, volume 6) That is a very good start. If each community had that, it could spread to whole countries, and the world itself.

Over and over again, I pray that in our country, especially now, truth and justice will prevail.

It should be fairly simple. It is put that way here in the Bible. It is the first thing which God requires: do justice.

The thing is, we have to let go of selfishness, if we want to have real justice. We have to look at the big picture, not just our own interests. Otherwise, those things can interfere very badly with justice.

How about kindness? It says we are to love kindness. To me, that is a matter of love, and good manners, and having empathy for people, all mixed together. If we can accomplish even just one of those, we will be well on our way to “loving kindness.” Again, we have to think of others, rather than just ourselves and our own.

Lastly, there is “walk humbly with your God.” One of my books says that is “to be aware of one’s need for God, who walks as a partner throughout life.” (Storyteller’s)

That is one of my favorites! Or to quote the great theologian, Edith Bunker, from the old TV show, “All in the Family:” “He’s God. You ain’t.” That is what she said to her husband Archie, in one discussion they had. And we all need to keep that in mind: God is God, we are not.

The other thing on this one is that we need to keep God in our lives, as someone we are with, always. God is not meant to be someone whom we turn to only in an emergency.

We need to be humble as we walk with God, remembering God's greatness and our own humanness. And we need to be sure that we are living with God as our guide, the one who directs us.

As Christians, we need to remember that Jesus is our Lord, not just our buddy. Jesus knows what is best, and wants that of us, and for us.

Now, I got to thinking that it may seem kind of sneaky of me to have preached this after the offering has been taken. But the sermon is always after the offering.

Certainly, this Scripture does not mean that making an offering to God is wrong. How could that be? Historically, it is set down in God's Word that offerings should be made, in the form of tithes, that is, ten percent of our income. Some churches require twenty percent. It is a matter between you and God. And one of our "watchwords" is extravagant generosity."

So, yes, please tithe and support the church and its ministries. That will not require one thousand head of cattle or sheep, unless you are all fantastically richer than I thought. It will not require ten thousands of rivers worth of oil—I don't think olive oil is even produced here, is it?

And for the love of God, it will never, never mean human sacrifice.

For that matter, none of those enormous offerings would even fit in the offering plates.

The point is that what God really wants is us. God doesn't want the kind of offerings and sacrifices that would break us, or starve our families. Generosity to the point of insanity would not be what God wants of us.

No, God wants us. God wants us to live lives that reflect the qualities of justice, kindness, humility—lives that are godly. In that way, hopefully, it will show that we believe in God, we belong to God, and we can be a blessing to this world. Amen.

Preached by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters, February 2, 2020.