

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: Micah 6:1-8

Sermon Title: "God's Incredibly Easy yet Surprisingly Misunderstood Requirements"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

January 27, 2013

There is always a right way and a wrong way of doing things. When it comes to driving a car, you cannot merrily take the car down the sidewalk where people are strolling. You may kill somebody and definitely get arrested. You have to keep the car on the road that is clearly marked. When it comes to putting something together, like a bicycle for your child or grandchild, you have to follow the instructions to make sure every piece fits. Some men do not read the instructions, and they find pieces missing or they end up doing a certain task fifty times. Be it on their own heads. We may certainly say that the wheels do not go where the handle bars are, and the seat doesn't go where the pedals are. There is a right way of building a bike, or putting anything else together. Pieces will not fit together unless they come together in a specific order. Otherwise, we just add headaches to the whole project.

There is also a right way and a wrong way to serve the Lord, but we may not know what the right way is.

We may make it up the entire way, and find we are not doing what God wants us to do.

The people of Israel thought they knew. They had their laws to obey, their Rabbis' teachings to follow, their own customs to uphold. The whole time they thought God was pleased. Their actions seemed religious enough. Their laws seemed holy enough. Micah 6 tells us that God was not pleased. The people had gotten it all wrong. They were making a right mess of everything, which surprised them.

“O my people, what have I done to you?” asks the Lord. How have I burdened you, stressed you out?¹ What happened with us, God asks. I took you out of bondage from Egypt, right? I called Moses, Aaron, and Miriam as your leaders – they did a pretty good job, right? Everything was going so well between us. What happened? God almost sounds like a Jewish mother questioning his people, “My dear boy, look at you. Where did I go wrong as your mother?”

What about the time with Balak the king of Moab, and Balaam the prophet? Like Egypt, this was another time of deliverance. The story goes back to the Book of Numbers 22-24, in which Balak the king of Moab is physically sick over how the people of Israel are able to easily move from one country to another

¹ Micah 6:3.

toward their promised land. Balak calls for the non-Jewish prophet Balaam to curse them. The king wants to destroy Israel by spiritual means. But God stops Balaam from doing this; in fact, God allows Balaam's donkey to speak and convince him to bless the people of Israel, which he does. The people of God pass through the land, successfully crossing the Jordan at the Acacia Grove.

God says in Micah 6, "You remember this, don't you? What a great victory for us over evil. You made it to the promise land, from oppressive Egypt, through every dark and low valley. What happened? What went wrong between us?"

It is not that God went wrong and fouled up the relationship with Israel. Israel went wrong. They tried to run the relationship by their own standards. They tried to manipulate God, and tell him how they should worship him. God had no say. God had to get on board with what they were doing.

The Order of Worship seems impressive, as we read it from verse 6 onward. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and how should I bow myself to the High God of Israel?" Our worship service bulletin includes a Call to Worship, a Prayer of Confession and an Assurance of Pardon, prayers of the people, songs,

hymns, Scripture, and a sermon. Let's see what the people of Israel arranged for their worship. "With what shall I come before the Lord?... With calves a year old?" That's good. That's necessary. The law requires a sacrifice of a year-old-calf in Leviticus 9. What else? "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams?" Well, maybe not in all one go. Maybe over a person's lifetime, he or she could sacrifice to God a thousand rams. Maybe not thousands of rams. "Will the Lord be pleased with ten thousands rivers of oil?" Well, again, maybe not in all one go. By the way, how does one come up with 10,000 rivers of oil? There is no way a person could ever come up with 10,000 containers of oil, let alone 10,000 rivers! Isn't that a bit too much? "Shall I give my firstborn for my transgressions, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" Whoa, hold on now. Aren't we going a bit too far? Don't tell my son about offering the firstborn to God. He wouldn't be too pleased, since he is my firstborn. I wouldn't be very happy knowing that my parents could have given me up for their sins. I'm a firstborn, and wouldn't be here right now.

Haven't we just now crossed into the land of the ridiculous? The Order of Worship in Micah 6 starts with a calf one-year-old, which is doable. No faithful Jew would question it. But then Micah goes far

beyond the doable to what is extreme, even far-fetched. Thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of oil would ruin a person financially. The person would be so consumed with trying to collect these things, that he or she might give up wanting to worship God and scrap worship altogether. A giving up one's first-born child? This isn't just ridiculous – it is blasphemous. To think that God would want us to kill our child to worship him? Abraham tried it, and God stopped him. Isaac never went under the knife.

So what is going on here? Does God truly want us to go beyond our resources, go far into the land of the ridiculous, to worship him? Some people believe this. They think God to be so holy that they must try everything they can to get right with him. They must do certain things perfectly and say certain things perfectly to get forgiveness from God, and even then they don't believe they are doing enough.

Some Christians go so far as needing to recommit themselves during a retreat or concert event. They raise their hands and confess sins, and weep for their ignorance, and rededicate themselves to God. This is easy enough – it's like offering a one-year-old lamb. However, rededication should occur every day, not just when we go to the mountaintop. We make a conscious

effort to serve the Lord every morning, and rejoice in him every day God gives us.

But some people are so wrapped up in how holy God is and how corrupt they are, that they must perform for God in order to make things right. They must say prayers in the right way. They must kneel and cross themselves perfectly, so God may take notice. They must read the Bible perfectly, understanding every page; and if they don't then it proves they are weak in faith. They heap unnecessary requirements upon themselves, burying themselves in deeper mounds of their own worthlessness and depravity. They are so consumed with how wrong they are that they may never see the face of God. They may never see his hand reaching out to forgive them. My dad was Roman Catholic, and he was so burdened by the weight of his sin that he would not take Holy Communion, which was served every Sunday. The rest of us would leave our pews and receive the bread and cup, but my dad would just sit there, waiting for us to return. One day I said, "Why don't you join us?" And he said it was too complicated. "I've done too many bad things in my life." He seemed paralyzed in his transgressions that he couldn't feel the freedom of worship. I said, "Go to the priest then; let him forgive you." If you are Roman Catholic, and you believe the

priest can give absolution, then go. Get the absolution, and leave the cave of your self-pity. He wouldn't do it, not until I was much older.

Some people cannot forgive themselves for what they have done. If they cannot forgive themselves, they wrongly believe that God cannot forgive them. And, they wrongly believe, that if God cannot forgive, then they must always be doing something wrong. They have to do something extreme to show that they are contrite, willing to repent. They consume themselves with collecting thousands of rams and tens of thousands of rivers of oil, getting lost and overwhelmed in the whole pointless process. It really isn't worship for them anymore.

Israel and we assume too much. The question is "What does the Lord require," and we assume that he requires this and that, and we are wrong. God apparently is not interested in the size or cost of our gifts. God is not concerned with us over-expanding our devotion toward him with excessive efforts, putting ourselves on a pedestal and saying, "Look at me, look at me!" God does require something from us, but not what we expect. What God requires from us is within our grasp. It is easier than it looks.

Micah 6:8 – "[God] has shown you, O man, what is

good.” God has shown you – didn’t we get it? Haven’t we paid attention? If not, then let’s go over it again. “What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” Easy, easy stuff. It shouldn’t overwhelm us. It doesn’t overtax our resources, or even drive us to despair.

To do justly is to realize that we are all in the same covenant under God.² God is our God, and we are his people. Not you and me in separate covenants, but we’all. As we are to respect God in our mutual covenantal relationship, so we are to love one another. Justice does not refer to somebody getting our way. Justice refers to being together, without hindrance, without obstacle. Justice refers to loving each other as the Lord God loves us.

To love mercy means to have the desire to lift people up from their weaker positions.³ Just as we would want God to forgive our sins and restore our standing with him, we would hope that others might understand how far away we may stand with them; but then they can take us back to the path once again toward God. They are willing to lift us up from confusion and doubts – they would wish for us to do the same thing. We may also show them the path to take with kindness, and we encourage them along the

² Gary V. Smith, *The NIV Application Commentary: Hosea/Amos/Micah*, cf. 553.

³ Baker, Alexander, and Waltke, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, cf. 213-214.

way. All of us move from weakness to strength, from being lost to being found. This is loving mercy, and thank goodness God has a lot of it.

To walk humbly with God simply means to get on board with God's agenda. We bring our lives into conformity with God's will, which is a joyful thing to do.⁴ We don't assume anything – we check everything with God. We try as best as we can to follow God's footsteps in the sand, but if we should stray we may still see those footprints. They don't fade away with the wind or rain. We file back in line behind God and follow those steps, and enjoy the walk.

There was a great quote from the movie *Kingdom of Heaven*, which portrayed the fight for Jerusalem between the Crusaders and Muslims. One warrior priest tells a young knight, "I put no stock in religion. By the word *religion* I have seen the lunacy of fanatics of every denomination be called the will of God... Holiness is in right action, and courage on behalf of those who cannot defend themselves, and goodness. What God desires is here," and he points to the young knight's head. "And here." He points to the young knight's heart.

That's what Micah is trying to get the people of

⁴ Ibid., cf. 214.

Israel to understand. What God wants is our minds and hearts. God wants the two main organs in our bodies that make us do things either for the bad or for the good. And when God has our minds and hearts, he has the rest of us. We can take our whole bodies, and demonstrate to us what is good, what is beneficial.

Following what Micah outlines is enough. It will take us a lifetime just to understand doing justice and loving mercy and walking humbly. Why add any more to that? Why try to make up systems and practices that God does not expect us to make up? We definitely want to please our God, and our God sets up standards that anybody may take on. They are doable. All we need to do is carry them out. No more excuses. No more unnecessary obstacles. We have a lifetime to carry out God's wishes to the best of our abilities. It is an honor to take up the challenge.