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FOREWORD

In this Faculty Bulletin Pat Graham's study of Chronicles reminds us of God's concern for congruence between faith and life--integrity. Rick Marrs tells us that Christian integrity expresses itself not merely in religious exercises but in just and merciful conduct. David Worley and James Thompson explore the relation between faith and specific areas of life. Worley looks at the relationship between Christianity and the marketplace within the frame of Pauline thought. Thompson recalls Tertullian's pointed question (What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?) with particular reference to the arts--specifically, literature and theater. The concluding article reminds us that character and conduct are formed by our communities. It raises the issue of the impact of modernity upon the Christian community.

A word of appreciation is due my colleagues on the faculty the Institute for Christian Studies for their cooperation in presenting these essays. Special thanks are due to Mrs. Nancy Tindel, faculty secretary, for her help in preparing this issue of the Faculty Bulletin.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

AN EXPOSITION: WHAT IS GOOD?

By Rick Marrs

“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 first-born for my transgression,
 the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”
 He has showed 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?

Micah 6:6-8

Several years ago, a cartoon depicted Satan standing at the gates of hell welcoming newcomers. The caption below read, “You will find that here there is no right or wrong . . . only what works for you.” Today we find ourselves living in a society which is sharply divided over what constitutes right and wrong. Our society comprises significantly divergent perspectives from adherents of extreme permissiveness (for whom right constitutes whatever “works for you”), to supporters of utilitarianism (for whom right is whatever benefits the most), to

advocates of ultra-conservatism (who tend to make every issue moral, from prayer in schools to the Panama Canal, and to speak authoritatively on all such matters). In such a context, the message of Micah needs to be heard again. As Christians, we must continually ask, “What is good,” or, as the parallel line states, “What does the Lord require?”¹

With What Do I Approach God?

As moderns, we often approach the Old Testament text with some bias, thankful that we have freed ourselves from the external ritualism and legalism of our Old Testament forefathers. And yet, we pay a heavy price for this bias, for in so doing we no longer hear God’s word addressed to us. Conversely, if we are willing to identify with spiritual ancestors, we may hear God’s ancient word once again speaking to our modern context.

As we enter the social setting of Micah 6:1-8, we find ourselves in the midst of a court scene. The Lord is indicting his people for their breach of covenant. Yahweh asks, “What have I done to deserve such a response?” Most significantly, the Lord is addressing a people who see themselves as devoutly religious. Their sacrifices are numerous, their prayers profusive, their worship elaborate.² Ironically, their religion is the heart of the problem! Apparently Micah’s contemporaries see themselves as appropriately religious, even though their society is in total disarray!

In response to Yahweh’s stinging indictment, we hear the accused replying:

With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high? (v. 6)

Even though the people ask the question, from what follows it seems clear that they presume to know the answer. If God is unsatisfied, then they simply must increase the amounts--more calves, rams, oil, and so on.

As we read this response, we may be tempted to smile wryly, grateful that we have gone beyond Israel in thinking that sacrifices (however substantial) could make one acceptable before God. And yet, if we are honest, we often come before God in worship “toting our credentials.” We, like the rich young ruler, come with a desire to fulfill all the requirements so that we will be declared “good” by God. Thus, to modernize this ancient text, we assume that what God wants from us are our most valuable possessions, our securities, our fortunes, and the like. If God is unsatisfied, then we must increase the amounts! Even though these offerings may at times reflect lofty goals, we must once again hear Yahweh’s response to “what is good.” Micah 6:8 is addressed to an audience asking the question, but living convinced they already know the answer!

Micah’s Word of God

He has showed 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? (v. 8)

Micah's answer was neither new nor unique. It was as old as the Decalogue. Not only had Israel been informed of God's will, she had even received a demonstration of that will in Yahweh's gracious behavior toward her. God's actions toward Israel set the standard for his expectations of her behavior toward others. For Micah, the "good" Yahweh expected from his people was demonstrated in the "good"³ he manifested toward Israel.

Micah called his listeners to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God." The terms justice and kindness, are both familiar covenant terms. For Micah, to practice justice means to actualize the will of God in one's daily affairs, to uphold the right in one's daily conduct.

[Justice] means guiding one's activity not according to personal advantage, not according to personal comfort, not according to the desire to dominate, but according to God's will as it is formulated, for instance, in the Decalogue.⁴

The prophets of the eighth century univocally decry the social injustice rampant throughout Israel and Judah. Tragically, although religion was ever-present, social justice was noticeably absent.⁵

If justice was absent, how much more so its counterpart "steadfast love" (RSV: "kindness"). The term used here by Micah is hesed, the term for covenant loyalty. Incredibly, Israel /Judah of the eighth century could worship God at one moment and then exploit the poor the next! God's people inexplicably manifested no sense of community. Again, for Micah this could only be because Israel had not taken

seriously God's treatment of them.⁶ Micah's self-assured audience had never seen themselves as truly needy and helpless before God. For Micah, what was needed was not more legislation, but a restoration of a sense of community, a renewed sense of brotherhood. To put God's will into practice (i.e., "to do justice"), is, in essence, to practice love (i.e., "to love kindness").

Finally, Micah calls his listeners to "walk humbly with your God" (so RSV). This is not a third directive in a checklist; rather it is an inclusive expression of what has just been stated concretely. Only one who walks humbly with God can practice justice and manifest steadfast love. Micah's term "humbly" does not connote self-effacement; rather it conveys the nuance of attentiveness or thoughtfulness. This nuance is best exemplified in the imagery found in Psalm 123:2:

Behold, as the eyes of servants
 look to the hand of their master,
 as the eyes of a maid
 to the hand of her mistress,
 so our eyes look to the Lord our God . . .

To walk humbly with God means not going one's own way presumptuously, but watchfully attending to the will and way of God! At its profoundest level, to walk humbly with God is to practice justice and manifest steadfast love.

Certainly the ultimate model of one who walked humbly with God was Jesus Christ. No passage better expresses our Lord's studied attention to the will of God than Philippians 2:5-8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.⁷

To walk humbly is to refuse to become self-satisfied, arrogant, and intolerant critics of others' sins. It is rather to see ourselves as glad recipients of the grace and forgiveness of God. Only then can we practice the justice and love God seeks from us.⁸

Conclusion

On January 20, 1977, President-elect Jimmy Carter, in his inaugural address, said: "To take my oath of office I put my hand on the timeless passage of the ancient prophet Micah" and then proceeded to read Micah 6:8. He concluded his address stating that he hoped after four years our nation could say that not in vain had the words of Micah been recalled; that there had been a striving for justice, kindness, and humility.

As children of God, each day we must grapple with actualizing the reign of God in our lives. We must ask not only, "What is good?" but also, "What does the Lord require?" An easy out, for us as for ancient Israel, is to give him "things" (in whatever form they may take). However, if we take seriously Micah's message, we realize that God is not simply seeking "more religion;" rather, he wants our religion to impact on all aspects of our lives! At its deepest level, Micah 6:6-8 really is about sacrifice. However, it is not of a kind posed by the question (v. 6). Rather, it

is a sacrifice of the self. What God is seeking is not the life of something, but the life of one who stands before him and walks with him. Only one who has come to know the empowering way of God (Micah would say--who sees himself as an undeserving recipient of the saving acts of God) can stand for the eternal values of God.

What is good?

The good that Yahweh seeks in every person among his people is rooted in making justice and steadfast love the controlling interests in all of life, thereby fostering a relationship with Yahweh that is characterized by paying careful and judicious attention to honoring his claim on all of life. This is the offering Yahweh accepts.⁹

Notes

- ¹ The Hebrew literally reads “and what Yahweh seeks from you.”
- ² For a scathing critique of Jerusalem’s worship from a contemporary of Micah, see Isaiah 1:10-17.
- ³ Not unimportantly, in v. 5d, the Hebrew literally reads, “that you may know the righteous (acts) of the Lord.”
- ⁴ H. Wolff, Micah the Prophet (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 106.
- ⁵ A classic New Testament example of Micah’s opening statements is found in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The rich man apparently had no concept of social justice. Certainly it was not his fault that Lazarus was in such a beggarly condition; it was, however, his fault that Lazarus remained in that

condition! Strikingly, in response to the rich man's request that a warning be sent to his brothers, Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." For Abraham, as for Micah, the message was old and well known.

- ⁶ This sense of shared commitment or loyalty is well illustrated in the dialogue between Rahab and the spies in Joshua 2:12. Rahab entreats the spies, ". . . as I have dealt kindly (Heb.: hesed) with . . . me."
- ⁷ We would do well to avoid the romantic notions often envisioned by the phrase "walking with God" (e.g., attested in such songs as "I Come to the Garden Alone"). Biblically, to "walk with God" involves going where God has gone. If we take such a journey seriously, we come to the stark realization that God in Jesus Christ has journeyed quite often in rather undesirable places with rather unsavory characters!
- ⁸ An excellent NT example of this charge of Micah occurs in John 7:53--8:11. In the episode of Jesus and the woman caught in the act of adultery, Jesus finds himself "caught on the horns of a dilemma." Will he take a hard or soft line? Dramatically, we find in Jesus' response that precious blend of justice and compassion: "Neither do I condemn you (compassion), but, go, and sin no more (justice). Not insignificantly, this woman found Jesus' attitude toward her remarkably different from that of his opponents. Jesus' opponents saw the woman simply as an object to be exploited in an argument; Jesus saw her as one desperately in need of faithful commitment.
- ⁹ A. Hunter, Seek the Lord (Baltimore: St. Mary's Press, 1982) 252.

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