

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost; October 1, 2023

Micah 6:6-8

+ Give Less +

**With what am I to appear before the LORD?  
How should I bow down to God on high?  
Should I appear before him with burnt offerings,  
with one-year-old calves?  
Will the LORD be delighted with thousands of rams,  
with tens of thousands of streams of oil?  
Should I give my firstborn for my rebellion,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?  
He has told you, mankind, what is good.  
What does the LORD require from you,  
except to carry out justice and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God?**

Micah likes to ask questions. A few weeks ago we heard him ask, “Who is like the Lord?” and give the answer only the Lord himself could give. Today we catch Micah in another inquisitive mood. **With what am I to appear before the LORD? How should I bow down to God on high?**

It will be easy to understand why Micah asks these questions if you will remember how he answered that question a few weeks ago. “Who is like the Lord?” The answer, from the Lord himself: No one is like the Lord. He bears the sins of his people on his own shoulders. He tramples their rebellion into the dust and heaves their trespasses into the heart of the sea, never to be seen again. The Lord is so good to his people, perfectly gracious and forgiving, that if he did not tell us these truths about himself, we would never be able to imagine it. And even after he tells us about how good he is and how good he is to us, and even after we believe, it still boggles the brain and stuns the soul.

If you remember that, it is easy to understand why Micah asks these questions today. The Lord is so good and so good to us. Anyone who knows that and believes it will naturally ask this question next: What should I give to God for all he has given to me?

Micah has some ideas about how to answer that question. Since God has been so good to his people, they should give him offerings. Indeed, the Lord commanded the Israelites to bring him offerings. But that can't be enough, can it? God must require more from us for all his goodness to us. We can't stop with offerings, there must be more! Give more to God! Give more!

How about this, then? We won't just bring him offerings, we'll bring him the best offering we can! We'll bring him a one-year-old calf, a very valuable animal. But wait! That's only one animal! That can't be nearly enough for a God so good! Let's bring him lots and lots of animals! Let's go out to the hills and gather up a couple thousand rams and bring them all to the Lord!

But no! That's not enough to give God for his infinite goodness! Thousands of rams won't do it! Alright, then. Let's give him more. How about tens of thousands of streams of oil! That will cost millions! Right on! Right on! More for the Lord! More and more and more, bigger and bigger and bigger!

But wait! That's not enough. Those are just animals, no matter how many. Oil is just a thing, no matter how pricey. If we're going to give God enough, why not give him what's really most valuable. That makes sense right! **Should I give him my firstborn for my rebellion, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?** Whoa! That got really dark in a hurry, didn't it?

But, if you're following Micah's line of thought, why not? If God has given you everything in pure goodness, and your goal is to repay him for that goodness, wouldn't you have to give him everything you have, including your kids? It actually is the logical ending place if you want to answer the question: **With what am I to appear before the LORD? How should I bow down before God on high?** with, "More and more! Bigger and bigger!"

Starting with giving more and more, bigger and bigger to God is spiritual silliness that crosses from silly into sinful arrogance. It happens when sinners think God on high needs something – anything from us. And then in our arrogance we start to think we need to give God more and more and better and better because if we don't God almighty may not get his work done without us. And so Christian pastors tell their people to give until it hurts and Christians proudly open their wallets to give more and more to their good God.

We need to start in the right place, which is a good reason not to answer the question, **With what am I to appear before the LORD?** yourself. It's a very good reason to let the Lord answer it for you. And he answers like this: **He has told you, mankind, what is good. What does the LORD require from you, except...to walk humbly with your God?** Don't start with trying to give God more and more and more. Start by giving him less. First go to him, open your hand and admit, "Lord, I have nothing good for you. Even if I did, you are the Lord of the universe. You already own everything I might appear to own. From the start, the only thing I have to bring you is my sin and eternal damnation." Then, as Micah says, God will take your empty, filthy hand in his and walk with you.

Start with a humility. Start with acknowledging your inability to give God anything good. Then walk with him. Walk with him through the prophets like Micah, and see his promises for your Savior to come as a humble Servant to suffer for your sins and take them all away. Walk with him to Bethlehem and see his Son, true God, lying in a manger, born in deep humility. Walk with your Savior all through his life of perfect humility, and see the One who is God suffer the shame and humiliation of the cross to make you God's holy child for eternity.

Go to God in humility and walk with him. He needs nothing from you, but you need something from him: the answer to what Micah calls your **rebellion** and **sin**. If you start by trying to give God more, you'll end in twisted arrogance that says, "Even the sacrifice of a child isn't enough!" But if you stand before God in humility and walk with him, you'll see him sacrifice his Son for your sin and rebellion. And in that sacrifice, you'll receive his salvation.

And then God will tell you more. First, the fact that he doesn't need anything from you should be a relief. You don't have to give him a thing. So when you bring him something good – anything good – there's no place for pride, only humble thanks to your saving God. And when you bring him something good – anything good, you don't have to guess what he wants.

And that's the other reason humility before God is so important. Not only does the humble heart open an empty hand and walk with God, but it also lets God speak and declare what pleases him. We don't

have to guess what kind of sacrifices he wants or in what measure he wants them. Once you go to God in humility and receive his grace, he tells you another thing so amazing that you never could have thought of it yourself: there's nothing you can't sacrifice. You can – and will – give him everything you have, not because he needs it or because you have to, but because you have seen his love for you.

But this is another spiritual error that comes from arrogance: that a believer has to give God things that look big and impressive and grab attention. I've got to give a thousand rams and ten thousand streams of oil and why stop there? I must go all the way to the most extreme lengths of sacrifice!

Again, start by giving less. There are simple things God wants from us that aren't going to grab attention. They were things the people of Judah were struggling with, and Micah points them out in these verses: a simple thing like giving fair treatment to the poor in court cases; a simple thing like showing mercy to someone who owes you something. Do the simple things before you start herding a thousand goats and pouring out ten thousand rivers of oil to the Lord.

Now, don't get me wrong: there's a time and place for massive, earth-shattering gifts, when we maintain a humble heart while giving them. But the Lord wants the humble and small sacrifices, too. Start there. Treat people fair and don't beat them down when they're in your debt; those are two things the people in Judah were struggling with. Maybe we could start with things like this: when you get to the checkout at the exact same time as someone else, don't worm your way in front of them. Double-check your kid's homework and ask if they need help with it. Spend some time chatting with fellow Christians and getting to know them. These are things no one is likely to notice; things for which no one will ever build a statue of you. They are humble sacrifices to the Lord. Those are the works to start with, before we start thinking about herds of rams and rivers of oil.

Here's why the Lord tells us to start with the humble sacrifices: he doesn't see them as small. He sees every act of thanksgiving, every sacrifice, as huge and perfect because he is our Father and we are his children. Five dollars to a food bank, given from a humble heart, is huge to God. One kind word, from the humble heart of his child, is huge to God. A few minutes for a lonely person, given from a humble-hearted Christian, is God's treasure.

Give less. First go to God in spiritual humility, admitting you have nothing he needs, nothing good at all, only sin and rebellion that needs his forgiveness. Walk with him, and see him forgive it. Then gladly give him all the blessings he has given you, starting with the little things. Amen.