

### Three Little Words (Micah 6: 1-8) ZCC 8/11/13

*1 Listen now to what Yahweh says: "Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear what you have to say. 2 Hear, you mountains, Yahweh's controversy, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for Yahweh has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. 3 My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me! 4 For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage. I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. 5 My people, remember now what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of Yahweh." 6 How shall I come before Yahweh, and bow myself before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? 7 Will Yahweh be pleased with thousands of rams? With tens of thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my disobedience? The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? 8 He has shown you, O man, what is good. What does Yahweh require of you, but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God? (World English Bible)*

If you were lost in the Amazon jungle, starving, you might happen upon a native. If so and if you had your American Express card, you could use it to pay him for food and water, right? [wait for an answer] Oh, that's right, natives don't take American Express :) Ok, forget that idea—instead you could pay him in good old American dollars—maybe a couple of hundred dollar bills would do the trick, right? [wait for an answer] OK, forget that idea too. They don't use dollars in the jungle do they? How about if you just happened to have a brick of gold—just like they keep in Ft. Knox—right there in your purse. You could offer him your gold for dinner. How would that work? [wait for answer] Still not the right currency is it? Still not something he needs or wants. But what if you reached into your back pack and pulled out a nice new shiny stainless steel knife or a machete? NOW you are talking! I'm thinking this is the right currency and you might get enough food to last a year.

It seems as if many people of my generation set their sights on material things and not much else. If we have done that, we may not have the time or energy to “buy” our children's love with guidance and presence and time and love. We may try to use money or stuff to connect with our children—to give them things instead of us.

If you are from the generation just before mine, I've heard from some sources that everything wrong with the world is your fault—OK maybe your fault and my fault—or the fault of our generations you might say. You see, your generation was one of the first who had the means to really spoil your children. If you were a parent in the 1950's you were probably able to give your children things that you never had—never even dreamed of having. You lived through the depression and you wanted your children to have more and better.

Maybe when we give too much materially we tend to not give enough of ourselves. In the past, parents “bought” their children's love and respect with their presence and their guidance and their love. In the modern world, we may be tired and busy and we may have the tendency to absent physically and even more importantly, emotionally.

Don't get me wrong—I believe it is OK to spoil children. I've heard that you shouldn't hold a baby too much—that if you do it will get spoiled and want to be held—but what's wrong with that? What's better for a baby than being held and loved and being physically present with someone who loves it? Give your children things—toys and other fun things. Kids need to run and play and have time to have fun. They shouldn't be working in coal mines or sweatshops.

But...

You knew there was a “but” didn't you? No matter how we try, we can't use “things” to buy our children's love—because it can't be done. It will never happen. The currency is wrong—“things” are not legal tender in the human heart. No matter what you give, it won't be enough. A human heart can only be “bought” with a human heart. Love can only be “bought” with love. It takes love and time and sharing of self to buy love.

In the book of Micah, the tribe of Judah is in big trouble. They have strayed from God. The northern kingdom was traditionally the rebellious one but in Micah's time, Judah has also slipped into sin. Micah has pronounced God's judgement on them—but that judgement is interwoven with mercy and love.

In the passage I just read, the southern kingdom was denounced—accused of being unfaithful and untrue to God.

It appears that the leaders and the people were still keeping up the required sacrifices and holding the required festivals—going through some of the motions of being God's people—so maybe turning back to God looked easy on the surface. Just try a little harder and hold a little better to the letter of the law. Just keep the commandments better and all would be well.

I can just hear the leaders now: “Yeah, yeah, yeah, Micah—we hear you. Do a few hail Marys...a little fasting...watch our language for a while—then we can go about our business, right? God will leave us alone for a while if we sacrifice a few more bulls, right?”

Micah cut that off before it even got started good—Micah gave God's reply to questions not yet asked.

[re-read verse 5]

Micah says, “don't even go there...” and then reminds them of their history with God—and how God responded in the past to such ideas. He reminds them of the story of Balak and Balaam. In case you don't remember, Balak was a king who wanted to defeat the children of God. His strategy was to send for Balaam, a sometimes prophet of God. When Balaam arrived, Balak asked him to get God's blessings on his plan—to bless his efforts to defeat God's own people.

This was a common strategy in those days—after all if you could turn the hand of a people's OWN GOD against them, then they couldn't possibly survive your attack. Of course YHWH God would have nothing to do with that—he of course refused to bless Balak.

In verse 6, there is the gist of the conversation between Balak and Balaam. Balak is desperate for God's favor. “What can I do? Tell me and I will do it...” He was a king—and a wealthy one at that. He had untold riches. No matter what the requirement, he could meet it. He was frustrated. [read verses 6 and 7] He was willing to try ANYTHING to win God's hand.

Rivers of oil would be nothing to him. The translation I read mentions year-old calves, but some translate this as a year's worth of calves—maybe that means 365 calves or maybe it means all the calves born to the king's herds in a year. Either way, he would sacrifice them all. Thousands of rams could be offered.

Maybe he took Balaam aside and told him quietly. “look, if you can get your God to bless me in this—well, I am even willing to offer my own child, my firstborn.” He was that desperate—but even that was a no-go. Instead God made Balaam bless Israel.

Because Micah brought up that story in the context of his people's then-current situation, I think the most important thing they could have done is to look at the question Balak asked, “how can I win God's favor? How can I get God to bless me? How can I stand before almighty God?” THAT is the point Micah is trying to make—in a real sense, the question is “what is important to God” or even “what does God love?”

We find the answer in vers 8. [re-read 8]

Notice what we did NOT find in verse 8. Did we see rivers of oil? Did we see rams? Did we see calves? Did we see our firstborn? No! Why? Because those are the wrong currency. Balam was trying to “buy” God with the wrong money.

I know, God can't really be bought anyway—but in my mind it is like the old saying, “you can't take it with you” and what someone followed up with, “no but you can send it ahead...” We can't buy God but I do think we can cause him to look favorably on us. We can get God's positive attention—we just can't get it with oil or rams or calves or firstborn—or any goods at all.

According to verse 8, God cares about three things: justice, mercy, and humility.

Micah was using an old story—something from Israel's history to make a point. He was saying, in a real sense, “you are doing it wrong but here is the right way...” He was saying that God is the same as he was before and he cares about the same things as before. He was saying that they should look at history so that they don't repeat it in a bad way—seeking to please God the wrong way.

I think we can do the same thing—we can pull from Micah, who pulled from Balam and Balak, and find what pleases God today and what God is seeking from us. Seems to me we sometimes treat God like modern parents tend to treat their children—we offer things and stuff and we offer everything but ourselves. We offer religious acts for their own sake, thinking that is what God wants, but that isn't it. God wants us—he wants our time and intellect and our being—our hearts and minds.

Once God has us—once we are God's people from the inside out, worshipping out of our genuine love for him, these three things will flow from us as a fountain that pleases God and causes him to favor you and me—his people. Justice. Mercy. Humility.

When the people of Micah's time fell to their knees, shouting, “what does God want from me anyway?!?!” Micah said, “Not want you think and not what Balam thought and not what you are offering.”

Justice. Mercy. Humility.

Interesting. These people are about to go under. They are about to be cast aside by God. They are about to lose everything physically and spiritually and they want to know what they can do. I'm with them—I'd think rivers of oil or sacrifice or coming to church every time the doors are open or praying every morning or reading 10 chapters in the Bible every day or something like that.

God could have told Micah to say any of those things—and yet they got (and we got) three little words.

Let me see what I can do with those words—what WE can do with them.

[1] Do justice. Exercise public justice. Work toward justice for every person. Hurt no man or woman's property or person. Treat every person with respect. In a real sense, this covers most of our civil duty/our social duty. Pay our taxes. Honor the king. Do right by every person we come in contact with—treating them well no matter what their station in life, no matter what they have or don't have. For me, this has a lot of social connotations. Working toward peace. Working toward human rights all around the world. Trying to end cruelty and injustice where ever it exists and whoever it is happening to.

The Pharisees used the law to take away the homes of the poor, the widows, the oppressed, the gentiles—those with no recourse. It was legal to do so, but it was not just. I'd say that if we know injustice is happening and if we fail to confront it, we are guilty of it ourselves. If we want to stand righteous before God, we will be just personally and we will work to bring justice to our society.

[2] Love mercy. Mercy is the essence of love. It was just for God to condemn humankind. We have broken his law. We have sinned. Yet, instead of justice, God has offered mercy. Mercy is what you get when you overlay justice with love.

**Mercy is what you get when true love comes into play. Mercy includes all acts of compassion. We are to be actively compassionate. We are to meet the needs of others. In the story of the good Samaritan, the religious leaders did not show mercy—for the sake of religious duty and religious cleanliness. Jesus said that mercy is the weightier portion of the law and in doing so he is commanding you and me to focus on the needs of the lowly and to show kindnesses to the downtrodden. Even if they don't deserve it and even if it gets our religious shell a bit dirty.**

**Even more than being about acts of mercy—this love of mercy is more about a lifetime of mercy. It is about having a merciful personality. In heaven, justice may be the rule, but here in fallen creation mercy must dull the sword of justice or we ALL will be in trouble.**

**[3] Walk humbly. Walk humbly with God or before God. Literally the word means to bow low. We are to have no pride before God. We are to take no pride in our personal sacrifices or our worship or our offerings or anything else we have or are or do for God. But note the first word. "Walk." In that term we see service and we see worship and we see honor. In that term we may see our two other words—BEing just and BEing merciful in the active sense. Servanthood. Honor. Worship—love for God shown in true worship, not just going through the motions like Micah's people were doing. Balak was a proud king. He wasn't used to walking humbly—he was used to humility at all. You and I may not be kings, but we also struggle with being humble. Sometimes we get a bit full of ourselves and we take pride in our abilities—forgetting that God gave them in the first place. We may get puffed up because of all the things we do around God's church. Sometimes we forget to walk humbly before God.**

**Justice. Mercy. Humility.**

**In those three words we don't find any religious acts—no religious things at all, really, in the classic sense. Do you think that means God doesn't want us to follow his law or to worship? No—those were and are still important. Judah was still sacrificing. Judah was still doing their religious duty—but it wasn't acceptable because it didn't flow from their hearts and their being.**

**It is important that we worship God in an acceptable fashion. Assembling and singing and keeping the ordinances and praising and studying.**

**But if that is all we have and all we are and all we do, we fall short.**

**Do justice.**

**Love mercy.**

**Walk humbly before God.**