

To Please The Lord

A Sermon by Rt. Rev. Peter M. Buss

"He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to humble yourself to walk with your God?" (Micah 6:8)

Such beautiful words. Such a comfort to the soul that is grieving, and feels the burden of sin. The context is important. The Lord has a controversy with His people. They have turned from Him. They have not obeyed Him. Has he ever let them down, He asks? Have they ever had cause to turn from Him? Look at what He has done for them. Then the people, or perhaps the king, who at that time was Hezekiah, give answer. What does the Lord want of me? What does He expect, especially considering my past wickedness? External worship, extravagant gifts, or the sacrifice of a child whose birth formed one of the most precious moments of my life?

In the internal sense a more complete and deeply beautiful conflict of ideas is set forth whose resolution simplifies life in this confusing culture in which we live. These words are not chosen at random. Each word indicates an attitude toward life.

"Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings?" This is a natural response in all of us: to turn to the Lord in prayer, in confession, hoping that in this lies forgiveness. This passage, together with several others, is often quoted in the Word as an illustration of the fact that external worship, confession and prayer do not purify us. Such teachings are not simply said for bygone nations who used to believe in the magical power of external rituals. They are said for us as well. Rituals and worship are not by themselves pleasing to the Lord. Nor does He want them by themselves. We too can fall into the trap of confessing our evils, getting a feeling of comfort perhaps out of saying what bad people we are, without seriously intending to change; of being members of the external church, and feeling a certain comfort which turns us from the business of repentance.

"Shall I come before Him with calves of a year old?"--calves which would be offered on that altar. Calves represent natural feelings, the pleasures of this earth. A calf is a harmless animal, but a useful one.

Sometimes we think we can please the Lord if we give up a certain external pleasure. There is the martyr in many people. It breeds the feeling that if we are suffering in some way, or if we have given up some external joy, taking away from ourselves an enjoyment that is perfectly reasonable, then we are bound to be pleasing to the Lord. We are showing how much He means to us.

We can see something of this attitude in an example of a little child who has been given \$5 by an aunt who then leaves town. She tells him to buy some candy for himself and his brother. He is tempted to spend it all on himself, but he controls the pleasures of taste and he shares it with his brother. That is a good thing to do, but there is a tendency to feel that somehow by that he has earned salvation. Perhaps there are people who have given up more lucrative jobs to continue to live near a church society or to send their children to New Church schools. They feel that the loss of the pleasure which that sacrifice has meant buys them favor with the Lord. It is not that they say it is so, but they sometimes reflect on it with a great deal of satisfaction.

"Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" The first two ways of approaching the Lord are clearly good, but it is equally clear that they are not by themselves enough. These next two are more subtle. Rams represent the goods of spiritual life, and rivers of oil represent the truths that come from good--the truths that speak of good. We are tempted to feel that we can live a good life without overcoming our evils if only our life abounds in good things done (thousands of rams) and in true things spoken (ten thousand rivers of oil).

Only a king could give thousands of rams. Not even a king could give rivers of oil. We are tempted to look inside ourselves and see untold treasures. The Lord has given us some rather wonderful gifts and we feel that if we use these good things to do what is good, and if we teach and speak of wonderful ideals, then we are pleasing the Lord. Isn't that what life is all about?

It sounds as if the answer should be yes. But it is not necessarily so. A person can spend his life doing good things. He can speak clearly and with great vigor of the ideals of the church. Yet without the acts of repentance he may not love these things at all. He may be using those good deeds and good words to further his own ends. Do we win

salvation by many good deeds, thousands of rams, by many true things spoken, ten thousand rivers of oil? No, we don't.

Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? Hezekiah turns to that forbidden act of child sacrifice in the last question to the Lord. This reflects a cry from the heart and an inappropriate approach to our God. It is very different from all the other offerings which have been suggested. The speaker now knows that he has done evil. What can possibly atone for it?

The firstborn represents charity. It represents the first, innocent joy in charity which the Lord allows all of us to experience at times. Every one of us who can be saved has at some time felt an unselfish joy and uplifting when he or she has been able to serve someone else without thought of reward. We have felt that this is the spirit of heaven. It is an innocent love. We didn't create it. The Lord caused it to be born--our firstborn child.

Sometimes when we realize that we have done what is wrong we have the fear that that kind of love is lost to us forever. Maybe we will finally be accepted by the Lord, but the pure joy of heaven cannot be ours. We are too evil. There are many people walking this earth who would love to turn to the Lord, and perhaps in their hearts they are turning to Him. But the hells have taken hold of their minds and they feel more deeply than they can express that they are forever inferior. They have sinned too much. The pure love of heaven can't be theirs. God doesn't have the power to give it to them. In feeling this way they are unknowingly saying that their firstborn, something the Lord made in them, has died and will never live again.

So let us rephrase the questions of the prophet Micah in the language of the Writings. Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Does He want me to worship Him with my lips a great deal? Is that all He wants--burnt offerings? Does He want me to give up some of my external pleasures, perhaps even live a life of self-denial--calves of a year old? Does He want me to plunge into acts of good and speak earnestly of lofty ideals so that I will be a shining example to others of a saintly being --thousands of rams, ten thousands of rivers of oil? Or have I sinned so deeply that I must come to Him as a second class citizen who has lost his right to the true wonder of heaven?

"He has showed you, O man, what is good." Yes, it is true. The Lord does have to show us what is good. Left to ourselves we develop many strange ideas of what is pleasing to our Lord, but what does the Lord require of you but to do justly and to love mercy, and to humble yourself by walking with your God?

That seems to take care of it.

Yet there is an internal sense to these words too--an internal sense which has endless meaning. Those three phrases were not chosen at random, nor named in that order without thought. There is a flow to them and there is a promise in them. Justice is the law of the natural heaven. It is the law that controls natural man. Mercy belongs to the spiritual heaven because it is an essential feature of charity, of how we deal with our fellow people. Humility comes from walking in the presence of the Lord from a love of God which ultimately is known only to the angels of the highest heaven.

The simple truth is that we have control only over the natural, only over the lowest of those three realms. The only one that we can do as from ourselves is to do justly. In that we can have a part.

It is interesting that doing justly involves all those other five things that went before--all the questions in the book of Micah. It is a part of justice to pray to the Lord sincerely within reason. It is a part of justice to give up some natural pleasures if they would lead us to love evil. Therefore the Writings speak of sacrifices of calves being pleasing to the Lord because of what they represent. It is a part of justice to do many good works and to speak with sincerity of the wonderful ideals of our church. It is even just to see where our evils have hurt the spirit of charity, the firstborn with us, and yet to see that in the Lord's mercy that firstborn can be restored to us and not be sacrificed, even as Isaac was not sacrificed though Abraham thought he would have to be.

You and I can do justly. We can act in the spirit of the laws of justice which the Lord has revealed. And the first law of justice is to reject what is wrong in us because it hampers all further acts of good.

Of ourselves we can do justly. But how can we make ourselves love mercy? We may speak of mercy. We may force ourselves from conscience to show mercy. But what power in the human mind can create the love of mercy?

Can we walk humbly? We may be able to curb pride and conceit. We ought intellectually to acknowledge that all is from the Lord, and without Him we could have no life. But can we walk humbly? What power in us gives birth to that spirit?

We cannot do these things. There is no power in man to create a celestial or spiritual love. Yet the fact is that it is part of justice to show mercy and to show humility even when we do not feel or love them. It is part of justice to seek for and long for a merciful and loving spirit in dealing with others, and a humble heart in the presence of God.

No person in his early age can be merciful or humble in spirit. Perhaps that is true through most of our lives. But from early age we can long for mercy. We can long to lose conceit. We can read the teachings about these things in the Word and try to apply them. When we are angry with someone else we can try to show mercy, shun unforgiveness. When someone has done something wrong, we can pardon. We can develop a way to overcome self-righteousness and the wish to condemn, try to foster in ourselves a willingness to overlook the faults of others--or better yet, to help them with them if it lies within our power.

When we have done what is right, we can actively seek to be humble. We can find ways not to take the credit. Even as we smile and accept the thanks, we can consciously turn to the Lord and give Him the glory. We may know that the spirit of conceit has not yet been fully cast out, but we are trying to walk humbly, and the Lord will hear and make our efforts succeed.

As a church and as individuals we can love mercy by seeking it. We can walk humbly by consciously avoiding conceit and the desire for recognition, and by trying to be grateful in the presence of our Lord.

What does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God? The word "require" means two things here. The Lord requires these things in the normal sense, that is, He says it ought to be so. But in a deeper sense, when the Lord gives an order, it comes to pass. He makes it come to pass.

There is only one thing in all of life that we can give to Him that is not His. That is our freedom. There is only one thing which the Lord cannot have unless we give it. And that is the decision to do justly. That is ours to give. And when we do, He can give us the other two, more gentle

qualities. That is what He meant when He said--and these words are on the beginning of the New Revelation given to the New Church--"Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things will be added to you." Amen.

Lessons: Micah 6:1-9, Luke 18:9-14, AC 4899:3