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WHAT IS TRUE RIGHTEOUSNESS?

Most people tend to justify their way of thinking and their actions. We can convince ourselves that we are thinking/saying/doing the right thing. What we normally do is *what we want to do* and then create a series of arguments as to why we are right. All too often, we justify our actions on the basis that what we are doing is not nearly as bad as what someone else does or is doing. But does any such arguments or reasonings really make any difference except to our own conscious? Is there a "right thing" to do? What is true righteousness? What do we or should we use as a basis of comparison in answering such a question? Isaiah found himself in the presence of God one day while he was in the Temple. He had a vision of God and as a result of that experience concluded that his own righteousness was as "filthy rags." Jesus related a story about two men who went to the Temple to pray. One, the Pharisee, focused on himself and other people and concluded that he was a pretty good person and offered thanks to God that he was not as other men. The second man saw himself in the light of God's greatness and standards and cried out for mercy because he realized that he could never measure up.

Many times we who are "church people" get caught up in the religious practices of our church and we tend to think that this is all that God expects of us. We attend twice on Sunday, during the middle of the week and maybe even do something extra such as sing in the choir, serve on the board, work with youth, build habitat houses, and a host of other good things. But is this what true righteousness is all about?

The people of ancient Israel thought that all that was involved in pleasing God was to make the right sacrifices and attend the right festivals. They did not see that falsehoods and cheating or taking advantage of the poor was related to God's expectation of His people. Because of their sin and their refusal to repent, God would send judgement on these people. It would come first to the Northern Kingdom and then more than 100 years later to the Southern Kingdom. God's judgement did not come without adequate warning. He sent prophets such as Isaiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah to warn the people of a pending judgement day. Micah's message was in the form of a trial in which God brought charges against His people for their actions of unrighteousness against their fellow man.

1 ¶ Listen to what the LORD says: "Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say.

2 Hear, O mountains, the LORD's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the LORD has a case against his people; he is lodging a charge against Israel. MICAH 6:1-2

The format of this prophetic message from God is called a Covenant Lawsuit. The scene that Micah paints for us is one in which the earth itself is to hear the arguments of the plaintiff (God) and the defendants (the nation of Israel). God is the initiator of the suit and He, through His prophet Micah, calls the nation before the bar of judgement to plead their case. You know, when we stop and think about it, we are always "pleading our case" for every situation that arises. We plead our case most of the time with our own self. We justify, in our own minds, most everything we do. We might be somewhat hesitant to make such arguments or rationalizations to other people since we probably realize how weak our justifications usually are. We need to keep in mind that we are promised that, one day we will need to give an account for everything, even every idle word (Matt 12:36). God was calling Israel to account just as on the Day of Judgement He will each one of us to account.

Just as God wanted the mountains to hear what Israel had to say, He wanted creation to hear His accusation against Israel.

3 "My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.

4 I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.

5 My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counselled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD." MICAH 6:3-5

This passage is interesting in that God is inviting Israel to tell Him how He had wronged them. He was willing to listen to any complaint that they might have had against Him. Had God failed them or disappointed them when He delivered their forefathers from slavery in Egypt? Did He send them bad leaders in Moses, Aaron, and Miriam? This event was the touchstone event for the nation. It would be like our Declaration of Independence and Revolutionary War that led to the establishment of this nation on the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In a spiritual sense, the deliverance from Egyptian slavery is like our salvation experience. This question would be like God asking Christians if He had disappointed them in sending Jesus to die for our sins.

The situation with Balak of Moab and Balaam the prophet was an example of how, time after time, God had taken a situation that their enemies had intended for evil and had turned it around and caused something good to result. These were examples of the righteousness of God in behalf of Israel.

6 ¶ With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

7 Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

8 He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. MICAH 6:6-8

As Micah spoke for the people, He questioned the sufficiency of formal religious exercises. "Coming before the Lord" was the practice of people (particularly males) going to the Temple annually on major feasts days such as Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Formal worship involved the practice of physically bowing down before God. In fact, the Hebrew word this is translated "worship" literally means to "bow down." Other elements of their formal worship involved animal sacrifices and grain offerings mixed with oil. Most people believed that such practices were all that God wanted of His people. Micah questioned if the Lord would be pleased with these "religious observances."

They could look around at their neighbors and compare the religious practices and might even concluded that the pagans were more devoted and sacrificed more in the worship of their false gods than was Israel in their worship of the One True God. Some of their neighbors sacrificed their children to idols as evidence of their devotion. Micah raised the question as to whether such practice would be pleasing to God.

The reason he raised such questions was to point out that it is not the outward display of our religion that is pleasing to God, but it is what is on the inside that is the reason for the outward action that is important to Him. They could sacrifice the finest animals to impress their neighbors rather than having a genuine love for God. People today go to church and give to charitable causes and are outwardly well behaved because the community expects it of them or their employer expects it of them or they get their name in the newspaper for having given to various good causes. If Micah were here today, he might have us question our motives and would have us examine whether God is pleased with such "sacrifices."

What the Lord requires is fairly simple but it may require greater sacrifice than giving an animal or money. God wants us to do "what is right" regardless of the cost. He wants us to give up our right to "righteous indignation" at the wrongs that are around us and replace it with and unconditional love that shows mercy to those that go astray. The final requirement is perhaps the most difficult in that to "walk humbly with God" requires a death not of an animal or even our first born but of ourselves. The opposite of humility is pride and pride is the evidence of the activity of the Old Nature being "alive and well" in our inner being. To walk with God involves agreeing with Him and not relying on our own wit and wisdom but trusting His word for everything in life and death.