

BaptistWay Bible Series for May 27: God has told us

May 16, 2012

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The present lesson focuses on the central passage of Micah. This section presents a covenant lawsuit by the Lord which ends with a resounding ethical admonishment in verse 8.

The Lord begins his lawsuit by commanding Micah to summon the mountains and hills to hear his complaint. These have witnessed both divine and human conduct. Their integrity is impeccable. As everlasting foundations (v. 2), the mountains have stood as silent witnesses to the sweep of Israelite history. They have a strategic perspective to affirm the validity of the Lord's grievance.

Verse 3 asks for Israel's complaint against the Lord. Though the Lord has an accusation (v. 2), he pauses to be sure Israel has no remonstrations. God is careful with his people even when he is not pleased with them. Here is sentiment similar to Isaiah 1:18, "Come let us reason together."

The next two verses provide two examples of how the Lord established his people with righteousness. The term "righteous" does not merely mean right, but faithful within a relationship. God showed his righteousness toward Israel by redeeming her from Egyptian slavery. God also intervened in the crisis on the Plain of Moab as Israel stood poised to enter the land of promise.

The two events referenced in verses 4-5 featured God overpowering two highly placed humans. God broke the power of Pharaoh who thought he was a god. He also chose to work through three honorable, but very human

characters in Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Balaam, a prophet-for-hire, was contracted to confound the divine power that enabled Israel. Instead, God confounded Balaam's power and freed Israel from the last obstacle to her entry into her land.

God's power to deliver his people would lose its impressiveness if he were to lose his people to the wily maneuvers of a prophet-for-hire. Truly Balaam was no match for God's infinitely greater power, but the point is, often people don't realize the Lord's great motivation to provide for and protect his people. God has demonstrated his righteousness in his relationship with Israel. These examples and countless others answer whatever complaint Israel may have stated as an answer to the question in verse 3. Thus the people are silenced.

Verses 6-8 deliver Micah's landmark pronouncement. It has two parts: (1) a dismissal of religious performance as a means to righteousness before God (vv. 6-7); (2) a pronouncement of what God expects from his people.

Verse 6 discusses coming before the Lord. Worship is an approach to the Lord as King. The ancients approached an earthly king with a type of worship—acclaiming the greatness of one's ruler and demonstrating one's submission to the king's rule by bowing to his authority. The exalted Lord is the King of all and therefore must be worshipped accordingly—by acclaiming his greatness and submitting to his authority.

The second part of verse 6 mocks precise and exacting religious observance. The logic is similar to Samuel's words to Saul in 1 Samuel 13:11-14 which records a story with same perspective as verses 6-8. See also 1 Samuel 15:22, which teaches that obedience is better than sacrifice—the precise sentiment of this passage.

Verse 7 exaggerates the proportions of one's sacrifice to make the point that increasing the amount of sacrifice still does not satisfy the Lord's

expectations regarding his people. Even the ultimate sacrifice of one's own son cannot satisfy God's requirements for his people. One's sinful flesh cannot produce a satisfactory sacrifice for sin. In stark contrast, God's Son can satisfy remarkably all God's requirements for his people and save them from their sins.

The logic of verse 7 is that no religious activity, no matter how excessive, nor how ceremonially correct, can satisfy God's requirements for his followers. Furthermore, human offspring cannot fulfill a person's obligation before the Lord. If either of these cases could be true, then the result would be human self-righteousness and self-justification (or self-salvation). The Bible teaches, however, that none are good and no one is righteous (Romans 3:10-20). Something beyond human power is needed, therefore.

Verse 8 delivers Micah's famous declaration of the Lord's requirements of his people. The "good" referred to here is the good that preserves the solidarity of an interpersonal relationship. In Israel's relationship (covenant) with God, Israel was expected to obey God's commands (here, requirements).

Three items are given as test cases of a right relationship with God. From a New Testament perspective, these items appear to fall short of describing a correct relationship with the Lord. Baptists, perhaps, would like to see admit, believe and commit as the three vital ingredients of a healthy relationship with God instead of act justly, love mercy and walk humbly.

Micah, however, has an Old Testament perspective where the law operated as a school master (Galatians 3:25) who drilled his pupils in patterns of behavior that gave deeper insight in later years. Thus the point is not that one could substitute the three actions of verse 8 for sacrifice. Instead, the point is God's people should so practice their heart commitment to God that their external actions produce justice, mercy and humility before God. These qualities only can be produced consistently by heart in a right

relationship with God.

The three characteristics God desires in his people are summaries of extensive material in the Old Testament meant to guide people through prescribing external behavior. The learning comes from reasoning from external to internal. Thus God has shown what he desires—a heart so committed to God that it produces high-level activities such as justice and mercy toward humans and humility before God.