

## **Bribing the Bigwig** [Text - Micah 6:1-8]

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Throughout much of human history, many religions have portrayed God - the Divine Source of All Things - as desiring a wide variety of appeasing gifts from God's created offspring. And unless those gifts are given, the Creator of the Cosmos apparently feels inadequate, ignored, and extremely irritated! Fortunately, sacrificial offerings could block the fury, or buy the favor, of that Big Boss Upstairs. And the greater the sacrifice, the more likely the desired results. That's why live animals, or even first-born children, were offered on the altar - lest the wrath of God come crashing down upon your head. Of course, most religions have come a long way, developing a more mature understanding of what God might be like. Rather than a deity full of insecurities, or petty jealousies, God is seen as the Source of Infinite Wisdom, Love, and Grace. This is certainly the God who Jesus came to reveal - a Loving Heavenly Parent, who compassionately cares for all God's children. Even the Prophet Micah, some seven-hundred years before Jesus, understands the absurdity of trying to buy the favor of the Holy One who already gives us all that we have. Accordingly, Micah asks - then answers - a series of rhetorical questions:

"With what shall I come before the Holy One, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Holy One be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Holy One require of you? To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

Now, both Micah and Jesus were quite familiar with the long list of sacrificial requirements found in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet they both had a mature enough understanding of God to realize that the Divine Preference is for mercy, rather than sacrifice; kindness, rather than condemnation; self-giving love, rather than strictly-enforced laws. Therefore, both Micah and Jesus elevate the human condition, by raising-up a healthier image of the Divine Source of Life. By challenging the defective image of an angry, needy god, they help us focus on a clearer picture, of what Divine Love might truly expect of us.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lists several qualities of God's blessed followers; but this morning, I'd like us to focus on the words Micah uses to express his understanding of the Divine Desire. Both men recognize that the idea of appeasing God with sacrificial offerings, is as ridiculous as children trying to bribe their parents with presents purchased with the parent's own money. Therefore, the question is not "What can I give God, to make God love me?" It is rather, "How shall I live my life in *response* to the amazing love and grace that God has already shown me?" Micah provides a precise, three-fold answer: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.

I'm going to begin with Micah's third principle, and take them in reverse order. It's not because Hebrew is read from right to left, or that I'm completely backward. It's because I believe the starting point for any ethical behavior begins with how you and I envision our relationship with God. How we walk with God - or better yet - how we understand God's desire to walk with *us*, will definitely impact the way we approach our lives and our faith. If the goal of our religious activity is to enhance our own personal standing with God, then our motives are essentially selfish, and tainted by our desire to somehow manipulate God, in order to save ourselves. However, when you and I accept the premise that God already

accepts and saves us, then our relationships - with God and with others - are much more honest and healthy.

Walking *humbly* with God, means that you and I humbly accept the truth about who we are: Marvelously created Life-forms, fashioned to reflect the Image of our Divine, Originating Source. Now maybe that doesn't sound humble or modest, but it really is; because it's not about what you or I have done, it's about what *God* has done. It doesn't mean that we are greater or lesser than anyone else; it simply allows us to appreciate our place in this world, with and among the rest of God's Creation. Walking humbly with God, means that we can anticipate a Divine Presence *wherever* we go; which can inspire us to personally exemplify that Presence. Walking in step with the Divine Source of Life, encourages us to do some truly courageous things. It moves us steadily forward on the journey of faith, freedom, and compassion.

Walking with a humble awareness of the Divine Presence also empowers you and me to do the second thing on Micah's list: to "love kindness" - to show genuine compassion to those around us. As we humbly learn to respect others for who they are - sisters and brothers also created in the Divine Image - we begin to appreciate our remarkable similarities, and our wonderful differences. We also recognize that the Love of the Holy One is infinitely capable of embracing us all - that there is no shortage of Divine kindness! Therefore, we can extend it to our family, our friends, and our neighbors. We can even reach-out to the strangers we meet, trusting that there is a Sacred Presence in each encounter.

Whenever I see one of those bumper-stickers that says: *Practice Random Acts of Kindness*, it reminds me of Micah's insight, that God wants us to "Love Kindness." Because the more we truly *love* kindness, the more we will want to practice those

compassionate acts. And as you and I walk [or *drive*] humbly with God, our awareness of that Holy Presence helps us focus on the many opportunities we have to do good. It doesn't have to be something grand or glorious, just some action that is thoughtful, kind, and considerate. Often, it's those small gestures of consideration and compassion that helps turn someone's bad day into a better one. And sometimes that makes a much bigger difference than you or I ever realize. Learning to "*love kindness*" - and putting that kindness into action - also helps us follow that first precept which Micah extolls: to do justice.

When you and I realize that the Holy One accepts us, walks with us, and calls us to show loving kindness, then we are awakened to the call to *do justice*. Trusting that the Divine Source of Life loves this entire Creation, you and I will want to make this world a better place. We will grow in our desire to see that all Life be treated with dignity and respect. We will grow in our compassion for those who are in any way held down by oppressive social systems. And we will begin to envision and work for a just world, where all people have equal opportunity to meet their basic human needs.

To *do justice* certainly involves more than just talking about it or hoping for it - it involves difficult and sometimes dangerous work. Jesus knew this, yet he lived his life as a true champion of Justice. He spoke out against the abusive power structure that had corrupted much of the religious community around him. He was very deliberate in reaching out to those who society oppressed or ostracized. He touched the so-called "untouchables", welcomed the outcast, and passionately insisted that no one be excluded from the Family of God. The cost of Jesus' passion for doing justice was nothing less than his own life. Yet the astonishing result of that loving sacrifice was nothing less than a Divine Reversal - transforming Death back into Life. That's because when a child of God does justice, shows loving

kindness, and humbly walks with God, there is nothing that can ever separate that child from his or her Ultimate Source of Life and Love. Jesus Christ confirms this truth in the way he lived and in the things he taught. And as Christ's followers, you and I are called to do the same:

To do justice, to love kindness, and to trust that wherever we go, the God of Love *is* with us - guiding us, protecting us, and walking beside us, every step of the way.