

Sermon for February 2, 2014 – Epiphany4

Micah 6:1-8 (NIV84)

Theme: True Religion consists of. . .

- 1) . . . remembering the Lord's salvation,
- 2) . . . not trying to buy God's love,
- 3) . . . walking humbly with the LORD.

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. 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 counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD." 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.

What does true religion consist of? Giving lots of money to church and charities? Becoming a monk or nun to do nothing but pray? Does true religion consist of coming to this building once a week and sitting through a "boring" service to show God that you still think of Him once in a while?

Today the LORD tells us that none of these things are the foundation of religion. What does true religion consist of? With the prophet Micah as our guide, let us learn that **True Religion consists of** 1) remembering the Lord's salvation, 2) not trying to buy God's love, and 3) walking humbly with the LORD.

Part One: Remembering the Lord's Salvation

Our sermon text is recorded by Micah, an Old Testament prophet who lived in Judah around the time of Isaiah – about 700 years before Jesus was born. The Jews, at that time, seemed like religious people, but their religion was not genuine. Sure, if you were to walk through Jerusalem during that time, you would see a beautiful temple, lots of sacrifices, and people proud that they could call themselves the LORD's chosen; but the LORD saw what the human eye could not see: that their hearts were far from Him.

Probably the best way to describe their relationship with the LORD is comparing it to a man who is cheating on his wife and doing his best to cover it up. Outwardly, the man does everything he can for his wife and tells her that he loves her; but the reality is that it's all a sham. His heart is somewhere else. This was the situation in Judah: certainly the Jews talked and acted as if they loved the LORD their God, but their hearts were far from Him. They were engaged in multiple affairs with foreign gods, material gain and the sinful desires of their hearts.

Sadly the Jewish people in Micah's time are not the only ones who merely put on a show of religion. We too might be tempted to think: "I am a lifelong member of Immanuel. As long as I come to a service every once and a while and make some sort of financial offering, all is well." It's all too easy for us to be religious in our actions, but have our hearts far from God. It's all too easy to say, "I love you LORD" with our lips,

but let our hearts be more attached to the things of this earth than to Him. It's all too easy to have an affair with the world.

The LORD knows all things – including the thoughts of the heart. This is why He confronts His straying people: *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.*

You have heard the expression: if only these walls could talk? If only the mountains of Israel could talk! They most certainly witnessed the LORD's faithfulness and love to Israel. Mount Sinai saw the LORD make His covenant with His people¹. Mounts Gerizim and Ebal heard the blessings and curses spoken to Israel as they followed the LORD.² Mount Zion, had the temple and saw the daily sacrifices performed on it – pointing forward to the promised Savior who would be offered up for the sins of the world. Yes, the mountains and hills of Israel would testify to the LORD's love and faithfulness.

Sadly, it was also on those mighty mountains of Israel that Judah was unfaithful to the LORD. The Jews built their secret shrines on the hills of Judah. At those high places the people worshipped the Canaanite fertility gods in the vilest of ways. And this leads the LORD to ask:

³ *"My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me. Even though Judah has been unfaithful to God, the LORD still calls them "My people", showing how much he cares. He asks: "What have I done to you? What reason have I given you to chase after foreign gods? How did I make your life so miserable that you can no longer worship me?"* The truth is that the LORD did nothing wrong.

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 counseled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the LORD."*

The LORD reminds the Jews of the faithful love He showed them when He delivered them from Egypt. He gave them good leaders (Moses, Aaron and Miriam) who prayed for the people, and through whom the LORD worked mighty wonders. The LORD turned every curse into a blessing and allowed His people to defeat nations much mightier than they.

Had the Jews forgotten these and the many more *righteous acts of the LORD*? It seemed so. And because they had neglected to think about His past deliverance, they drifted away from Him and started pursuing other gods. They went through the motions of worship, but their hearts were far from the LORD. Worst of all, they had forgotten the promise of the Messiah, and the salvation He would win.

True religion, then, is a matter of the heart. It thanks the LORD for all the wonderful things He has done for us. And, do you know what the word "thank" means? It is related to the word "think." To thank someone, then, is literally to think about the person and the wonderful thing he has done for you. True religion, true worship of God, is thinking about Him - recalling His salvation and rejoicing in it. Just as the LORD chose Judah, so also the LORD has chosen us to be His dearly loved people. He rescued us from sin, death and the power of the devil by dying on the cross for our sins and rising again to life. He called us to be His dearly loved people through the Gospel and sealed us as His own in the waters of Baptism so that we might serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.

¹ Exodus 19:17ff

² Deuteronomy 27:12ff; Joshua 8:33ff

The LORD loves it when we think about His righteous acts of saving us with thanksgiving. And how can we think about the wonderful things the LORD has done for us? By studying His Word at home and in Bible class and coming to hear it preached in worship. When we use the Bible to recall how much we need God's love and to what lengths the LORD went to save us, how can our love for God not grow in our heart? This, then, is true religion: remembering the LORD's salvation and not cheapening God's love by trying to buy it.

Part Two: Not trying to buy God's love

It's not uncommon for a cheating husband to try to appease his guilty conscience by buying his wife a lot of expensive gifts. In a twisted way, he thinks he is "buying" her love. But can anyone buy a spouse's love? Is it something for sale? No. Love is a gift from the giver. The love of a spouse is priceless – nothing could ever "earn" it and trying to do so is the height of arrogance. If this is true in regard to human relationships, it is certainly true regarding our relationship with the LORD.

And herein lay the problem with the Jews: they thought that they could appease their guilty consciences by "buying" the LORD's love. This is why Micah asks:

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?

The Israelites were proud of their sacrifices, but is this what the LORD wanted? Could the blood of all the bulls in the world or the sacrifice of your only child appease God? This is what the religions of Baal, Asherah and Molech taught – the very religions Judah was abandoning the LORD for. All false religions teach that you have to buy God's love. But is it true? Absolutely not: such thinking is offensive to God. Listen to what King David writes: in Psalm 51:16-17 - *You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷ The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

Sometimes we too are tempted to buy God's love and forgiveness. We might be tempted to think: "As long as I give the Church something, God will bless me." Sometimes we try to make deals with God: "Lord, if you do this for me, than I will do that." Is this what God wants from us — making deals with Him and trying to buy His forgiveness? Is there any price we can pay God for His love? No, and the LORD hates it when we think this way. It cheapens His grace. It degrades the infinite value of Christ's death. True religion does not try to buy God's love, but simply recognizes and rejoices in God's freely given heartfelt love toward us. True religion repents of all sin and unfaithfulness and trusts that the LORD is merciful and does forgive us. Why? Simply because of who He is, and His gracious decision to love us.

Part Three: Walks in humble love before God.

What did the LORD want from Judah? Great sacrifices that tried to buy His love? No. What the LORD desires is simple faith expressing itself in love: *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.*

God's desire is that we walk humbly with Him – that is, that we have an ongoing relationship with Him, that we remember His promise to be with us always, unto the very end of the age. To walk humbly with God is the hold on to Him in repentance and faith - knowing that we deserve none of the love and salvation

He graciously showers upon us day after day. Every blessing we receive from the LORD is a result of His grace and His love for us. This truth will lead us to love the LORD in return, and express our love in our interactions with our neighbor. True religion wants to reflect the love and mercy it has received from God towards others. How? By praying for all and sharing our wealth with them when they are in need. We will want to forgive those who sin against us, just as the Lord forgave us. We will want to study and share the Gospel with others, just as the LORD had it shared with us.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, worship the LORD with a true heart and not with a display of false piety. The true religion that God delights in consists of *remembering the Lord's salvation, not attempting to buy God's love, and walking humbly with the LORD*. Amen.