

January 29, 2023 – Micah 6:1-8

In the classic comic strip Calvin and Hobbes, Calvin makes a card for his mom and gives it to her on Mother's Day. The card reads: "I was going to buy you a card with hearts of pink and red, | but then I thought I'd rather spend the money on me instead. | It's awfully hard to buy things when one's allowance is so small, | so I guess you're pretty lucky you got anything at all. | Happy Mother's Day. There, I said it. Now I'm done. | So how about getting out of bed and making breakfast for your son?"

"There, I said it. Now I'm done." That was Calvin's only goal. He believes that doing something for his mom on Mother's Day is an obligation. A duty he's stuck with. So the quicker, the easier, the cheaper the way to dispense with the duty and move on, the better.

His heart obviously isn't in it. No words of love for his mother. No words of appreciating for all she has done. Just "Happy Mother's Day. There, I said it. Now I'm done."

Anyone who's spent even a few minutes around children knows exactly what Calvin is talking about. One child hurts another child: "Say you're sorry." "Sorry." A child receives a gift. "Say thank you." "Oh right, thanks." A grandparent needs help around the house. "Go help grandma." "Do I have to? Fine."

The words are there. The actions are there. But the emotions? The sincerity? The actual remorse for hurting someone? The actual gratitude for a gift? The actual selflessness to help someone in need? Those are entirely absent. You can make a child say something. You can make a child do something. But you can't make a child feel something.

I'd say this is a problem confined to children, except that it doesn't end in childhood. How many times have you said you were sorry in your adult life without feeling any real remorse at all? How many times have you said thank you for something you really couldn't care less about receiving? How many times have you helped someone purely because it was the socially expected thing to do?

I'm not saying we're all heartless sociopaths. But there are plenty of times in our lives when we say and do things because that's what etiquette demands. Not because we actually want to do them.

When it's between you and me, that's relatively harmless. When it's between you and God, the stakes are higher. Much higher. And human beings often do a very similar thing with God. We see it, in fact, in our Old Testament lesson for today.

This lesson starts off with God accusing the Israelites of various sins. The whole thing is actually set up like a courtroom. Micah tells the people, "*Arise, plead your case,*" because "*the Lord has an indictment against his people.*"

And what is this "indictment" that the Lord has made against his people? Well, we don't actually hear it in this passage. The specific list of accusations is in the verses immediately after our reading. But there are numerous sins involved.

God accuses them of "scant measures" and "wicked scales." Basically, widespread, unpunished corruption throughout the economy and legal system. Poor people are being cheated by wealthy merchants in the marketplace on a daily basis. And the Israelite authorities – the king, the elders of the people, the courts – they just don't care. They tolerate this corruption and do nothing about it.

God accuses the rich of being "full of violence." They have no concern for their neighbor's physical wellbeing. They have no qualms about using the threat of force to get whatever they want.

God accuses the inhabitants of Jerusalem of speaking lies and being filled with deceit. There is no honesty in their courts. There is no truth in their conversations. They are a society of selfish, manipulative people. Who will say whatever they need to – tell whatever lie they have to – to get ahead.

It is a broken, sinful society that Micah describes. But, honestly, it's not that different from our own. Bankers who cheat the system to get ahead. Rich men who build empires on the backs of mistreated employees. Societies driven by greed and deceit. It's pretty familiar stuff.

What's interesting is how this Israelite society has dealt with all this sin and corruption. Because they know they're breaking God's Law. That's maybe the biggest difference between our society and theirs. Ours is so ignorant of God's Word, we don't even know what sin is anymore.

But their society knew. They knew the 10 Commandments. They knew the Law of Moses. They knew the psalms of David and the wisdom of Solomon. They knew what was expected of them.

And so they did just that. Like a child being told to say they're sorry, or thank you, or to lend a helping hand, they said what they had to say, did what they had to do. And then they became like Calvin, "There, I said it. Now I'm done."

*"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"*

What do I have to do to get God off my back? That's what they're asking. There's gotta be some way to just make this go away. So what is it? Burnt offerings? Calves? Rams? Oil? A human sacrifice? What is it God? What's the bare minimum?

They didn't come up with this idea on their own. This is exactly how most pagan gods operate. They get angry, you give them what they want, and they go away. There's a drought? Pour out some oil to the rain god. You want to have a child? Sacrifice a ram to the fertility goddess. An enemy army is marching on your city? Sacrifice your child to the god of war.

And so the Israelites think this is how the Lord also operates. You just need to find the right way to say your sorry so that he thinks your sincere and he'll get off your back. It sounds kinda crazy and yet, Christians have been doing it for centuries.

In our "Bibles and BBQ" men's study, we were talking recently about the Roman Catholic doctrine of penance. Which is basically the exact same concept. Find a way to make up for your sin and God won't punish you. Say the rosary enough, do enough good deeds, give a big enough offering to the church, and hopefully, God will decide you're really sorry for your sin.

And while Lutherans may have purged that doctrine during the Reformation, we still occasionally fall into that way of thinking. Because I would wager that every one of us is guilty at some time in our lives of doing something for the church or for charity or just to prove to God our faithfulness that was motivated by trying to make up for a sin. Or that was done with less than sincere hearts. Or that was done because it was what we thought we were expected to do, not by God, but by those who were watching.

The Israelites of Micah's day thought that God wanted them to say they were sorry in some new and more convincing way. In some way that was more like the gods of Canaan. More like the gods of this world. And it wearied them. God was angry with them for their sin, but they were actually angry with God for constantly condemning them for their sin. Constantly demanding that they do more and more and more to express their contrition.

But then God tells them in this passage, "I don't need you to say you're sorry yet again. I already know that you're not. I don't need you to treat me like the gods of Canaan. I'm not one of those gods. And that's the point."

God didn't rescue the Israelites from Egypt because they said they were sorry. He didn't give them victory over King Balak of Moab because they gave him such great burnt offerings. He didn't do any of the saving acts of the Old Testament because of how sincerely they bowed down to him.

He did it because he loved them. Because they were his people and he was their God. Because he had made a covenant to be with them always. He did it because though they were sinners, he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

So abundant in love that though their sin should have demanded their firstborn to pay for their transgressions, God gave his firstborn to wipe away the sin of their souls. The only sacrifice that is needed for God was done by Christ on the cross. And the sincerity of his love for us washes away the insincerity of our love for him.

God brings his people to court and he indicts them for their sin. And he's right. We have sinned. We have not done what is good. We have not done justice. We have not loved kindness. We have not walked humbly with our God. God indicts us and we should be condemned. But the condemnation that we deserve is taken by Christ on the cross.

He is just. He is kind. He is humble. He does all that we don't. All that we can't. And then he gives us his righteousness while taking our punishment. He is God's Son and with him God is pleased. Through him we are God's sons. Through him God is pleased with us.

And so we don't need to be wearied by God thinking that we must do more and more. We don't need to offer burnt offerings or child sacrifices to say we're sorry. We don't need to do penance or work extra hard at church to prove our sincerity. We don't even need to write a card and think, "There, I said it. Now I'm done."

The yoke of Christ is easy. His burden is light. We find rest for our souls with him. For he has brought us out of the land of slavery. He has done what is good. And with him we walk humbly with our God.