

## WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE OF YOU?

Slayden Yarbrough  
First Baptist Church, Boulder, CO  
March 8, 2009

**Text:** Micah 6:6-8

**Introduction:** Being religious in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not an easy task. There are many models out there that are being advocated.

A. One model calls for ethical orthodoxy - do you have the correct views on divisive issues such as abortion, homosexuality, stem cell research, etc? At the same time there seems to be a silence on issues such as lying (or honesty), coveting (greed), violation of the Sabbath; honoring your parents, etc. I might add that the latter list all made the top 10 commandments, while the first list did not, at least not without an interpretation. Ethics are important. They express who we are by what we support and what we do in light of our faith. At the same time, it seems that our generation is very good at practicing “selective ethics,” while ignoring those issues that we are not comfortable with.

B. Another model calls for theological orthodoxy - For many in the Christian community the most important aspect of being a believer is whether or not you have the correct theological position on issues such as the Bible, the role of women, church and state, predestination or free will, legalism, etc. Again, rigidity by some on these issues leads to a selective orthodoxy in matters of doctrine and Biblical support to substantiate one’s views. Theology is important. It is the way that we seek to put into words the essential elements of faith. What we believe needs to be expressed with a consistency in terms of how we live.

C. Another model might be what I call a prophetic faith - this view uses the example of the Biblical prophets in terms of evaluating who we are today. Although we heard a lot of prophetic preaching in the 1960s (on social problems, integration, poverty, Vietnam), we don’t hear much of it today. Prophetic faith makes us uneasy; it makes demands on us in terms of how we see and treat others, especially those who are neglected or abused in our society; it criticizes overt dependency on public practice of our faith; and in a way it simplifies the heart of true faith in terms of the way that we live.

D. Today, I want us to look at prophetic faith and hear what one prophet, Micah, had to say in summarizing what he considered to be true faith in God.

### I. Let me begin by saying a few words about the Old Testament prophets.

A. The prophets were primarily forth tellers more than fore tellers. For many Christians in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the primary characteristic of the prophets was to predict the future. So many believe that their message for us was to tell us what will happen in the future. Often contemporary preachers will scissors-and-paste different Biblical passages to tell us what we can expect to happen sometime in the near future. The “Left Behind” books and movie are the best example of this.

In some ways, there is some truth in seeing the prophets as foretelling the future. But in other ways, that is a distortion of prophetic religion. Let me explain what I mean by this.

Usually, when the prophets spoke of the future their primary audience was their contemporaries. The prophets warned them of the consequences of their action in terms of what would happen in the future. They predicted the fall of the Northern Kingdom of

Israel, which actually occurred in 722 B.C. They predicted the fall of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, which took place in 586 B.C. They predicted the destruction of the temple of Solomon. All of these and other

predictions were predicated upon the continuation of the practices of the political and religious leaders, and the leading citizens of the Hebrew people.

B. At the same time, the greatest thing that a prophet could hope for was for his message not to come true! Jeremiah, a sixth century B.C. prophet, wrote that if God pronounced judgment upon a nation or people, and the people repented and turned from their wicked ways, then God would repent of the evil that he intended to do against them. A good example of this is Micah. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, B.C., he predicted the fall of Jerusalem to the Assyrian Sennacherib and his army, and the destruction of the temple. Under King Hezekiah, there was a brief revival, Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem failed, and Micah's message did not come true, I am sure to his delight. Later in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, B.C., when Jeremiah predicted that the temple would be destroyed, he was arrested. But the elders of Jerusalem remembered the message of Micah and the revival that it brought about, and released Jeremiah.

The story of Jonah's prediction of the destruction of Nineveh in 40 days never came true because the King and people repented. So the greatest success of a prophet was when his predictions did not come true.

C. So the bottom line for the prophets was to proclaim their messages for their contemporaries with the hope that the people would turn from their wicked ways. This is not to say that there never was a futuristic element to what they said. Isaiah spoke of one who would come bringing peace, hope, and justice. Such a message could apply to both the contemporary scene of the prophet and to the future as well. But it seems to me that the starting point is to understand what the prophet was saying to his generation, and then to apply his message to our generation.

## II. The Message of Micah

A. Micah was one of the Minor Prophets. This does not mean that his message was less important than those of the Major Prophets ( Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel). It just indicates that his book, like those of the 12 Minor Prophets, was a lot shorter. In fact, in the Jewish canon the Minor Prophets are simply called The Twelve, and are seen as one book.

B. Micah prophesied in the last third of the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Isaiah and Hosea were his contemporaries. He prophesied against Judah, the Southern Kingdom. There was a reckless type of irreligion present. The people did not want any kind of preaching except the weak, insipid type that would allow them to go on their way without embarrassment.

1. Some of the people would lie awake at night scheming of ways to steal the property of their neighbors. When the day came, they would go out and carry out their plan. Micah said that they would rob a man "and his house. A man and his inheritance." (Micah 2:1-2)
2. The prophets were false. They lead the people astray, telling them what they want them to hear. If the people supported them, they cried "Peace." If not, they turned upon them declaring "holy war."
3. The leaders and rulers denied justice to the people. They "twisted everything that is straight." (Erasmus, Praise of Folly, the wandering monks had no knowledge of books, so they made ignorance a virtue). The rulers turned the good into evil and the bad into good. They rendered court decisions based upon bribes.
4. The priests instructed for a price. The prophets gave their pronouncements for money. They deceived and misled the people, profited from their greed, and then proclaimed "Is not the Lord in our midst!" They stole from the people, then looked around at their wealth, property, and corrupt gains, and said "My how God has blessed us." Then they went off to the temple and carried out all of their religious duties and practices. (Micah 3:9-12)

B. In Micah 6:6-8, we have one of the greatest, simplest definitions of true religion.

1. Micah begins with a question, “With what shall I come to the Lord . . .?” What does the Lord require of us? Does he want sacrifices of young calves, 1,000s of rams, 10,000s of rivers of anointing oil, even the sacrifice of our first born like you found in some cultures at that time? Does God want the outward expressions of religion found in temple worship, giving, participation, praying?

Note that Micah does not condemn most of these things. Rather he points out the false dependency upon these symbols of religion. If God does not demand these things as the essence of faith, then what does he expect of us?

2. In verse 8 of chapter 6, Micah not only tells his hearers what God expects, he lets them know that he has already told them. “And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” That’s it. There is no mention of ethical orthodoxy in the sense that we hear today. There is no theological litmus test that one must pass to be accepted. Rather, Micah says that there are basic elements of religion that are lacking and must be practiced.

**a.** Doing justice: that was missing in the time of Micah (see 5:14-15a). It was also the prominent theme of another 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet, Amos. Amos had a harsh message of judgment for the people because of the injustice in the Hebrew society (poor were oppressed, beaten, down, abused). He is sometimes called a prophet of doom. There is little that is redemptive in his message. Micah proclaims the call for justice. But he is milder and calls for hope based upon repentance and a change in the ways of the people.

**b.** Micah also follows the teachings of the Minor prophet Hosea (see 6:6), when he calls for loving kindness or steadfast love. Actually, the term used by Hosea is the Hebrew word hesed, which really translates “covenant loyalty.” To be loyal to the covenant that the people had made with God required love toward their fellow Hebrews and kindness in their dealings, not corruption and dishonesty.

**c.** Lastly, Micah reminds us of the great theme found in the prophet Isaiah (see 57:15) - humility. The political, religious, and business leaders were arrogant in terms of their power, wealth, and influence, and considered it their right to oppress the down and out.

C. Micah was addressing the issues of Hebrew society in his day. He was calling upon the people to practice what they already knew that God expected from them. He attacked a false dependency upon the trappings of religion, the assurances of false prophets, the ritual of the priests, the participation in the ritual of the temple in Jerusalem. He did not condemn the worship of the Hebrews so much as he insisted that the heart of real religion must be practiced in order for the religious practices to have any meaning.

Application and Conclusion: There is a clear message in Micah for the 21<sup>st</sup> century believers.

A. First, we need to get to the heart of true religion. Battles over ethical and theological orthodoxy may be important. But the most important test of our faith is seen in terms of how we relate to and treat others and in recognizing the need for humility before God.

1. In the debate over ethical and theological matters too often we compromise the very faith that we are trying to defend. We reject people who differ with us on such issues. We question their faith, while allowing anger, hostility, misuse of authority and power, and in-fighting to distinguish our religion. And, so often we do all of this in the name of God.
2. We too often develop an arrogance based upon our ethical and theological orthodoxy that we are certain that we and no others are the true believers.
3. We compromise the very essence of our faith while believing that we alone are the true defenders of all that is good and pure. We fail to realize our humanity and our shortcomings and we remain silent on issues that are just as important, if not more important than those for which we do aggressive battle.

B. Second, we need to start by working on those things that really define true religion. We need to identify and seek justice in our society. We need to practice loving kindness toward others, even those with whom we disagree. And, we need to learn anew the lesson of humility before God.

C. God has shown us what is good. Having seen it, we need to practice it.

D. Maybe in order to be prophetic we need to take an honest look at our world, the models of religion that we see, and the true essence of faith for our time - then proclaim it with courage and practice it with consistency.

What would Micah say is the essence of true religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - perhaps to love everyone, even those who are hard to love; to treat people fairly and honestly, as we would expect them to treat us; to honor God with our heart, and soul, and mind - wait a minute, that sounds a lot like another prophet - Jesus of Nazareth. Maybe we should work really hard at proclaiming and practicing the prophetic model of religion.