

A REASONABLE RELIGION

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" Micah 6:8.

We know very little about Micah except what he has told us in the prophecy that bears his name. He was a member of a quartet of prophets who were contemporaries. These four men--Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah probably exerted a greater influence upon religious thinking than any other four of the Old Testament. While Amos and Hosea preached in the North, Isaiah and Micah brought God's message to the people in the South. Micah arose in the latter part of the eighth century before Christ. It was a period of turmoil, strife, change, and growth. Were problems were tackled and solutions found. A half century of peace had brought temporal prosperity, but the prophet could see storms in the distance. To turn these storms aside, or guide his people through them, Micah spoke out boldly on behalf of the common folk. To them he belonged, by birth and by choice. For them he demanded justice, and with them he pleaded for loyalty to God.

Micah lived in the country, where he seems not to have known wealth or ease. He contented himself with messages to people of his own kind. He was not a shepherd, like Amos, but he was a farmer. He was the one prophet above all others who pitied the poor. He was the poor man's friend. Other prophets, like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, had nobly pleaded for the rights of the poor, but no prophet of Israel made their cause so completely his own as did Micah.

Micah was preaching in Samaria and the border sections of Judah when Isaiah was preaching in Jerusalem. Micah had sprung from the poorest of the poor, he spoke mostly to the poor, and always on behalf of them; but Isaiah had come from a well-known family, and spoke mainly to the leaders of the people. Micah was at home in the huts of the common folk; Isaiah was at home in king's courts. Micah lived his life among the lowly; Isaiah moved in the circles of the mighty. Micah was a peasant and a man of the people; Isaiah was an aristocrat, a statesman, and counselor of kings. So humble was the family of Micah that his father's name nowhere appears in the Bible.

Living in the country, Micah was naturally a bit suspicious of the city. This suspicion soon changed into hot indignation. He came to look upon the cities of Jerusalem and Samaria as veritable cesspools of iniquity and injustice. This country preacher knew the tragic situation in Judah and Israel. Out where social wrongs are more keenly felt than anywhere else, he was able to sense the sufferings of the peasants under the cruel pressure of men who had power. The judges were venal, the priests were immoral and corrupt, the prophets were hirelings, the nobles took peculiar delight in fleecing the poor, and the entire group had built up a wall of enmity, fear and hatred that made life miserable for all classes. The nation was ready for a collapse. The princes, the priests, the prophets, and the people were responsible for its downfall. The people were so greedy for wealth that no step was too low for them if a bit of money was involved. Certainly a prophet was sorely needed.

On every hand there was a spirit utterly foreign to the sort of religious fervor that Micah desired. A scornful, reckless type of irreligion was prevalent. The people did not want any preaching done except the weak, insipid variety that would allow them to go on in their way without embarrassment. It is a tragic hour when people will hear only the man who panders to their selfish, sinful nature. Soothsaying, witchcraft, superstition and idolatry were prevalent in the land. The Assyrian practices and cults were still influencing religious behavior. The people could not be trusted. The prophets and priests were corrupt, selfish, immoral, and greedy. What good could come from such leadership? They merely wanted money, ease, cheap popularity, and some assurance that they could continue to live in luxury. They were willing to make war on all those who opposed them. The sins of the times have been summarized as follows:

1. Oppression of the poor.
2. Unscrupulous use of power.
3. Lack of integrity.

4. Reckless scorn of religion.
5. False prophets.
6. Greedy corruption in religious and state circles.

Micah felt called of God to denounce the evils that were blighting his people. "I am full of power by the spirit of the Lord....to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin." But his ministry was far more than a ministry of denunciation. His message was also constructive. He was inspired to define for us the will of God, both for the individual and for the world, with a beautiful simplicity. It is doubtful if any man in all the centuries that have passed since that far-off day has improved on Micah's definition of real religion.

"What doth the Lord require of thee?" he asks. In other words, what is necessary to please God? The answer which he gives is so simple that a child can understand it. It may be pointed out that Amos pleaded with Israel to do justly, that Hosea pleaded with her to love mercy, that Isaiah pleaded with her to walk humbly with God, and that Micah welded all three of these into a compact definition of Old Testament religion. Micah said that religion, to be anything, must be reasonable, practical, spiritual, and personal. He reduced the duties of religion to three heads—justice, mercy, and piety. Justice and mercy are duties we owe to each other. Piety is a duty we owe to God. This threefold duty is most reasonable. This is the essence of right thinking, feeling, willing, doing, and living. Be just in thought, word, and deed.

1. To do justly.

"Jus" is an old Latin word for right. It lies at the heart of the divine demands. God wants us to do right, to conform to righteousness. He wants us to think, to speak, and to act justly. Righteousness stands as the foundation of a man's religion. This means being right with God, right with others, and right with self. Can one meet that requirement? No, not unless he receives a power mightier than his own. He needs Christ and His Cross.

2. To love mercy.

God here calls for something harder to attain. Not only must a man do what righteousness demands, but he must also love kindness. God asks not only that we be just, but also that we be kind. If justice is being fair-minded in action, kindness is something better still. It is love in action. Kindness is a child of love. Merely to be kind does not sound so very heroic, yet nothing would do more to sweeten life and to change human desert into garden than plain, everyday kindness. Kindness is also God-like. Our God is infinitely kind. Luke summarized the beautiful life of our wonderful Lord in a single sentence by saying that He went about doing good. That is just another way of saying that He went about being kind. The field for the exercise of kindness is everywhere. There is seldom a day so uneventful that we do not have an opportunity to employ it. Kindness is needed everywhere. Kindness enriches both the giver and the receiver. Kindness is a necessity.

3. To walk humbly with God.

Walk with God! That calls for a life of deepening friendship with Him. To walk with God means to know Him so well and to love Him so much that you count it life's utmost joy to live in His presence. To walk also means progress, or growth in humility. Walking with God is a superlative privilege. This walk is one of light, joy, and triumph. To walk with God humbly indicates a teachable, submissive, thankful, patient, and dependent spirit; a close communion with God; and an increasing trust in Christ.

God yearns for us to walk with Him because we are the children of His love. He longs for our fellowship not only because He cannot be satisfied without us, but because He knows that we can never be satisfied without Him. God longs for our fellowship because He knows that it is only as we walk with Him that we shall be really just and kind. Justice and kindness at their best flow out of this lovely spring of fellowship with God.