

What's Expected?

A sermon in the 2017 Stewardship series "Satisfied"

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- Micah 6:6-8 ⁶ What shall I bring to the LORD, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins? ⁸ No, the LORD has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.
- Philippians 4:11b-13 ...For I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. ¹² I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content, whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. ¹³ I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: Faithfully serving God is not an obligation satisfied once-and-for-all by asking ourselves merely "What is due?" or "What do I owe?" but by giving our hearts to God.

I have it on good authority that it's not at all unusual for teachers to hear the question, "What do I have to do to get an A?" Conversely, they also hear a question like, "What do I have to do to pass this class?" In effect they're asking, "What's the least I can do and still fulfill my responsibility as a student making progress in my education?"

I remember a time in seminary when I resorted to an approach like that – doing the least I could do. Back in 1956 a generous Presbyterian named Samuel Robinson established a fund to provide scholarships at Presbyterian colleges and three Presbyterian seminaries. To receive the scholarship students had to memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The catechism consists of 110 questions and answers based on the much, much longer Westminster Confession of Faith written back in 1647. Both of those are in the Presbyterian Church's anthology called "The Book of Confessions" – you can look at one in the church library or my office.

When I was a student at McCormick Seminary, the fund awarded up to ten prizes worth \$500 apiece. You qualified by being able to write from memory ten of the Shorter Catechism's 110 questions and their corresponding answers that were chosen at random by the professor proctoring the exam.

Yes, I've memorized lots of things before, but I wasn't going to go to the trouble of doing this. But then the older students convinced me. "First," they said, "they always ask Question 1, so memorize that. Then," they added, "often less than ten people actually take the exam, so if you're one of ten or fewer and you can answer that question and sign your name, you're in!" It didn't feel quite right... but when you're trying to fund your way through seminary, \$500 is \$500. I didn't do the *very* least I could do, but I was close: as I recall, of the ten questions that were selected, I knew questions #1 and 14!

This morning let's think about the difference between "getting by" and "doing what's proper." Let's compare a miserly doing "the least I have to do" to a more generous, doing "what's fitting, what's appropriate, what's right."

What does God expect of us?

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Today's Old Testament reading is one of those verses that, when you hear it, you may think to yourself, "I don't know where that's from exactly, but I know I've heard it before." The Old Testament contains three books by "Major Prophets" and twelve books by "Minor Prophets." and the only distinction between them is the length of their books. The Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel wrote long books, while Minor Prophets wrote comparatively short books (like Obadiah, Habakkuk, and today's subject, Micah).

Micah was a spiritual guide for the Israelites. He lived about seven hundred years before the time of Jesus. In Micah's day, Jerusalem and its region were paying tribute – in effect, extortion money – to neighboring Assyria. Assyria had conquered the region immediately to Jerusalem's north, and the rich and powerful in Jerusalem were doing all they could to keep the Assyrians from trampling them down.

The prosperous Israelites wondered if God had allowed the Assyrians to push them around because God felt the Israelites hadn't been demonstrative enough of their faith. So in addition to having to make pay-offs to the Assyrians, the Israelite elite also ramped up their sacrifices and offerings to the Temple. But in the process of paying extortion to the Assyrians and trying to buy their way back into God's favor, Jerusalem's elite were ignoring the immense suffering of the ordinary people. They were doing the absolute least they could for the "man in the street," the "woman at the well." Micah saw the immense hardship on the average guy, the profound suffering of the impoverished. Micah could imagine God's dismay, God's disappointment.

That's when Micah called out the elite. He imagined how pious they sounded when they prayed:

⁶ What shall I bring to the Lord, the God of heaven, when I come to worship him? Shall I bring the best calves to burn as offerings to him? ⁷ Will the Lord be pleased if I bring him thousands of sheep or endless streams of olive oil? Shall I offer him my first-born child to pay for my sins?¹

They thought they could bribe God into allowing their privileged place in life to continue... but in the process they were ignoring the unmet needs of the very world they lived in. In pouring their riches into sacrifices at the temple, they were doing as little as possible for others.

Why would Micah – or I – protest treasures offered to God? Arguing this point may seem contrary to a church's financial stewardship campaign. But Micah is clear: the key issue here is not the quantity of money. What God desires first is a spirit of compassion that is given form, a spirit of compassion that is given power, a spirit of compassion that is given life by a spirit of generosity. In giving gifts to the Temple the Israelites were not inspired by generosity; the Israelites were inspired by a desire to protect what they had. But God wants us to see to the well-being of all God's children rather than focusing only on our self-interest.

Micah's now-famous words described that desire of God. Micah's words answered the self-centered prayer that boasted exaggerated promises of sacrificing "the best calves" and "thousands of sheep" and "rivers of olive oil" and even a beloved "first-born." Here's what Micah declared: "⁸No, the Lord has told us what is good. What he requires of us is this: to do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God."²

¹ Micah 6:6-7 Good News translation

² Micah 6:8 Good News translation

In other words, God isn't in the practice of spelling out a minimum pledge or a maximum offering. No, what God seeks first and foremost is a heart that is committed to justice, love, and humble obedience.

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Most organizations don't measure their viability by "committed hearts." They tally dollars. We know many charities that have increasing levels of privilege for increased levels of financial support. You give "X" amount to the orchestra or the theatre or to such-and-such charity event, and you receive a set of benefits, and if you give more money, you receive more benefits. Financial participation doesn't work that way in a church – not in this church, anyway.

When I meet with new church members, one of the things we talk about is how a local congregation is a self-funded, mission-focused organization. Usually people are familiar with the concept from previous churches, but sometimes someone will have little or no church background. In such an instance it's not unusual for them to seek me out privately to ask me about giving offerings. They'll ask questions like, "What do I owe?" or "How much should I give?" or "What's my fair share?" or "What's expected?"

I think the last question is the most meaningful question: "What's expected?"

- Some religious institutions tell you how much you'll give.
- Some churches dictate a percentage and expect you to demonstrate that you're fulfilling that.

But while money is as important to your church as it is to your credit card company or mortgage holder or auto loan or utility company, our focus is on the heart that guides the giving.

So, as a church that depends on money as much as participation, what do we expect?

- We expect our members to be grateful.
- We expect our members to be thankful for what they have without being resentful for whatever they don't have. Paul's words to the Philippians serve as an example for us when he wrote, "...For I have learned to be satisfied with what I have. ¹²I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have more than enough. I have learned this secret, so that anywhere, at any time, I am content...."³
- We expect our members to make gifts from the motivation of joy and not guilt – we are pleased... delighted... joyful to be able to participate in making this community of faith lively and devout and responsive and caring.
- We expect our members to give financially to the church as one way of expressing their desire for God's justice and love and community to come true "on earth as it is in heaven."
- We expect our members to consider giving gifts that reflect a measure of sacrifice – sacrificing a bit of self-interest for the sake of others, whether those "others" are in this church or in our community, sacrificing for the sake of others whether they are on this continent or a continent away.

Jesus didn't settle for doing the least he could to get by; he devoted himself completely to his mission: leading people – including you and me – leading us to worship and serve the Living God. That's what's expected of us.

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³ from Philippians 4:11-12 Good News translation