

What Does the Lord Expect?

Micah 6: 1-8

Matthew 5: 1-12

Contracts are the common way that we see expectations spelled out. The terms are presented, hopefully in a manner that is clear and unambiguous. Both parties fully understand what is expected of them when they agree to abide by its terms and fulfill their obligations.

Lawyers are the ones who get called when there is a failure. Lawyers will challenge whether terms mean what they say or if the terms actually convey something quite different. They can be highly creative in their arguments. We've seen this first-hand during the impeachment trial in the Senate.

Once a wicked lawyer hired a horse and, either through accident or abuse, killed the horse. Naturally the owner insisted on being paid its value, together with some compensation for the loss of its use. The lawyer acknowledged his liability, and said he was perfectly willing to pay, but at the moment cash was very tight. Would the stable owner accept a promissory note? "Certainly," he said.

Then the lawyer said that he must have sufficient time to get the money together. "You can set your own date," said the stable owner. The wicked lawyer drew up the note, making it payable at the Day of Judgment.

Eventually the creditor took the matter to court, and there, in defense, the lawyer asked the judge to look at the note. He did so, and then the judge replied: "The promissory note is perfectly good, sir, and as this is day of judgment, I decree that you pay now."

Expectations are also how we plan, predict, prepare, and measure up. Those customer service feedback forms often have boxes for "meets expectations," or "exceeds expectations." If someone or something "fails to meet expectations," you have a problem.

This would seem to be the case with God's evaluation of God's people. They've failed to meet expectations, and God has a problem and voices this complaint through the prophet Micah.

In the opening verses of chapter 6, God sets the stage of his courtroom: *Stand up, plead your case before the mountains, let the hills hear what you have to say ... For the Lord has a case against his people.*

Going to court when God has a case against you isn't very wise. This is one you really should settle before going to court. Anyway, it's too late now; here comes the charge.

God says: *My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.* God then proceeds to recount a brief history of their relationship together. There's only one reason for that: God's people seem to have forgotten their story together with God. It isn't that they've *actually* forgotten these stories, however they're *behaving* like they don't know these stories of their relationship with God. They're acting as if God is one with whom they have no meaningful relationship or covenant. They *act* like they don't know the expectations of their covenant together. Let's go further and see what else we can discover.

Verses 6 and 7 present the defense of God's people in response to God's complaint. God's people don't really seem to understand *why* God is complaining. They're blameless, in their own eyes anyway. They worship regularly; they make the prescribed offerings. What does God want? Does God want more? A thousand rams perhaps? Ten thousand rivers of oil? A sin offering of my first born perhaps? Is that what God wants? Will that make God happy and get God to withdraw this baseless complaint? They have resorted to a certain degree of increasingly sharp, nasty sarcasm. Again, such a snotty tone is not wise when defending oneself before God.

God's people have completely equated whatever they do in religious devotion, like attending worship, putting money in the plate, and generally doing whatever they think God would want, like being nice, polite, generous, thoughtful, and that kind of thing. Go to church and be a good citizen, that's all God wants from us, right?

First off, the prophet explains that God has shown you what is **good**. For God, "good" does not consist of worship alone. They don't seem to realize that "good" in God's terms has a whole lot more substance to it.

Then comes: "And what does the Lord **require** of you?" When the expectation gets laid out, there is nothing about worship there. It's all about active participation in creating a better world, in living the life to the Kingdom of God – practicing justice, mercy, and humility.

God's people thought that they were doing everything right, yet it turns out that they were totally missing the point – not even close. The disturbing connection between Micah 6 and most every-church-in 2020-USA is that we've totally missed the point in the exact same way. We think that we're all good with God if we're regularly doing worship, because God likes nothing better than to hear you sing music, pray for the health of your family and friends, sit through the sermon, and put money in the plate week after week. God's people think that these things constitute God's primary expectation, and they are wrong as Micah indicates.

Nowhere does Jesus say anything about attending worship as having *any* priority for his followers. In fact, he never says *anywhere* that believers should attend worship. It's like he didn't think that sanctuaries and rituals had any real value, and certainly not primary value, like we've given it. Acts of worship and devotion don't belong in a sanctuary according to Micah, but out there in the daily living of a faithful life doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with your God.

When Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount, notice that Jesus says nothing about regular worship attendance as one of the blessings. Where is “Blessed are you when you attend services each week”? Did he miss that one? Or was he challenging the same ritual-based mentality that the prophet Micah was addressing?

Worship is not separated as a time apart, but as a celebration within a continuum of active ministry. Worship is not the priority, the inspiration, the driver of behavior, but **the result**, the outcome of days of service to the Kingdom, of shared experience in the struggle to help people reach for God’s promise for them and to resist the powers of worldly oppression, denigration, and exclusion from fulfilling God’s promise for them.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 (and the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6), Jesus is presenting an outline of what the Kingdom of God (or in Matthew, Kingdom of Heaven – same thing) is all about.

“Blessed are you when you suffer the consequences of being a faithful servant of the Kingdom” is one way of summarizing the beatitudes. It takes the tag line of Micah 6:8 – “Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God” – and takes it one step further. In the Beatitudes, Jesus acknowledges the vehement, violent, vicious response that the world gives to those who try to flip the world’s script with their faithful defiance and compassionate resistance. Jesus flips the script by saying that for all the suffering the faithful endure for the sake of the advancement of the Kingdom, for all of the negative stuff that the world will throw at you, God will bless you in many ways for your faithful devotion in service.

Let’s deal with Matthew’s version briefly. We will see Matthew add qualifiers to the much simpler language that is used in Luke – they apparently shared a common source. The Beatitudes in Matthew stand alone whereas the blessings in Luke are balanced with opposites in woes. In Luke, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*, is later balanced by the opposite in a woe, *But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort*. It is simple and clear.

Matthew adds a qualifier or condition to the blessings and has no corresponding “woes”. For instance, Matthew begins: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*, using the conditional phrase “in spirit.” Apologists for wealth prefer to exploit the phrase “in spirit” to suggest that Jesus is teaching about being spiritually empty, merely sad or depressed, at the end of one’s rope. It *could* mean that, except that makes little sense.

First, it clearly references material poverty in Luke, and Matthew is unlikely to change the whole context away from material wealth. Second, it opens the string of Beatitudes as the lead statement, setting the tone for what comes after. Third, it results in the highest reward possible – *for theirs is the Kingdom Heaven* – an unlikely high reward for simply being in a negative spiritual state. Fourth, as the opening, it should reflect the highest aspiration, and simply being in a negative spiritual state is not that. Fifth, as we learn throughout the Sermon on the Mount, the terms and conditions are

quite radical departures from worldly expectations. Being sad makes no connection to anything radical.

Instead, we should begin with the “poor” meaning material poverty and then add Matthew’s qualifier “in spirit.” As the higher or highest aspiration, I believe it refers to those who have made themselves materially poor in a spiritual commitment to the Kingdom and to the poor. That is a high commitment, and it fittingly gains the highest reward – *for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven*. This sets a high bar for those who would follow Jesus and embrace the Kingdom life to aspire.

The second beatitude is similarly not to be fitted to some emotional condition: *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*. The word for “mourning” is not limited to simple grief at a loss. Set in the context of the Kingdom message and teaching of Jesus, it is quite different. It closely echoes Isaiah 61, the text used by Jesus to announce the beginning of his ministry. The mourning indicated here should be seen as ‘mourning over sinfulness,’ mourning at the failure to be completely faithful to God and the Kingdom, and mourning at the necessity of living and operating in compliance with, indeed aiding and abetting, the worldly powers. Again, it is not about a personal emotional state but rather a failure to serve God and Kingdom alone. For this mourning – reflecting an awareness of and desire for the Kingdom in contrast to denying the Kingdom – the believer will be comforted in the coming Kingdom.

Finally (I’m not doing all in one sermon), the third beatitude needs to be removed from the common understanding and be seen in light of the Kingdom teaching. It says: *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. For heaven’s sake, the “meek” certainly are **not** the timid, the shy, or the wimpy. The word used is close in meaning to “the poor”; in Hebrew, the expression would refer to the *anawim*. This term refers to those destitute, rootless, having no standing, no power, and no security. Luke doesn’t have “the meek” in his version because Luke opened the sermon on the Plain saying, “Blessed are the poor,” doing so without the qualifier “in spirit” used by Matthew. Here, Matthew takes up the **simply poor**, poor *without* any spiritual commitment to become poor. They, too, are blessed, and, even without the spiritual commitment, *they will inherit the earth*, enjoying blessings in the Kingdom that had always been denied them by the worldly powers.

Stopping there, we can see that what the Lord expects is for his followers to engage a process of radical change in their lives and in their beliefs about how life should be lived as a person of faith, as a citizen of the Kingdom of Jesus, the Lord. Micah tells us clearly that worship without a changed life is meaningless, teaching this long, long before Jesus. Jesus teaches us the way of the Kingdom as opposed to the way of the world, setting a high bar for his faithful followers. It isn’t a level of commitment that one attains overnight, and, joining with those who mourn, we may grieve our unwillingness to change our lives sufficiently. The beginning question is whether we will accept what the Lord requires of his followers, and then join him in living the Kingdom life.