

# St. Peter Lutheran Church - Modesto, CA

✠ Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost ✠

September 18, 2005

*Sermon by Pastor Johann Caauwe*

**“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Mic. 6:6-8, NIV)**

The sixth chapter of Micah takes us into a courtroom. The plaintiff in the case is Almighty God. He is bringing a charge against Israel. The mountains and hills are the jury, listening to the arguments. But through the prophet Micah we get to listen in, too. We, this morning, have the opportunity to watch and learn an important lesson. It’s a lesson about **God-pleasing humility**. As we listen, we will find out that the **proud try to appease God**. But the **humble seek to please God**.

In the first five verses of this chapter God calls on Israel to make its case. You might call the first part of our text, then, Israel’s opening statement, which consists of a number of questions.

**“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”**

Maybe you could call it a plea bargain. Israel doesn’t plead guilty, but it can’t claim to be innocent either, so it offers to humbly – or, at least that’s what it looks like – humbly bring something. **“With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God?”** Israel looks very humble, coming before the Lord, bowing down. However, the word translated as *come before* is a word that is used for people who are meeting in confrontation. In the books of Psalms, David uses this word when asks God to deal with his enemies: **“Rise up, O Lord, confront them, bring them down.”** Israel was coming before God to confront him, trying to make a deal.

But at the same time it was also still trying to look humble by coming “bowed down.” And again, the Hebrew word that is used here is not the normal word for bowing down. This word does not include the concept of humble submission to someone. This word simply refers to the person’s posture. So they looked humble. They were bent over, but that’s it. They offered to come before God, to make a deal, and to try to look sincere they would go through the motions of humility and submission. It’s like the mass murderer that dresses in a nice suit and speaks very respectfully before the judge and jury, but inside he knows he’s guilty and has no remorse whatsoever. He just wants

to get off the hook. Israel wasn't interested at all in pleasing God. They weren't humble at all! They were just trying to get off the hook, so they tried to appease God. They said,

**Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?** God commanded that his Old Testament people offer animal sacrifices to teach them primarily that he is serious about their sin. But they thought that by bringing a sacrifice they could buy God off. Maybe they could keep God happy if they would just burn a calf now and then.

**Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?** If one sacrifice doesn't work, maybe a thousand will. They make it sound like they would do whatever it takes, just to get God off their backs. They would pay any amount, give whatever they had to, just to make God satisfied

**Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?"** They would even go so far as to give up something more precious than gold or silver – their very own children. God never said he would be pleased with that.

In their bargaining, they acknowledge the cause of their problem – "**my transgression, the sin of my soul.**" It was no secret even to Israel that they had sinned. They understood very well what the charges were. They had committed crimes against God. They had committed crimes against their fellow man.

But by trying to buy God off they showed that they really didn't take their sin seriously. If they really thought that a lamb would cover it; if they thought a thousand lambs or their firstborn sons could pay the price for their sin, they were wrong. In Lent we often sing, "Not all the blood of beasts on Israel's altars slain, can give the guilty conscience peace or wash away the stain." There is no price we can pay that will remove our sin and guilt. There is nothing we can give to God to get ourselves out from under the sentence of eternal death.

So how do you plead? I doubt any of us would be so foolish as to think we could buy God off. But do we ever come before God with a less-than-humble heart? Do we ever come before God with humble *outward* posture but with hearts that are simply looking to get out of trouble? My conscience tells me that something is not right with me and God. It bothers me – a lot. It keeps telling me that I haven't done this. I haven't been that. What shall I do? Maybe just being at church will do it. Maybe if I go to church a lot, volunteer my all time, give generous offerings. I'll sacrifice the things that are most important to me, my time, my money and perhaps that will fix this nagging conscience of mine. On the outside all of that could look very humble, but it's nothing but pride, trying to make a deal with God, and that's not pleasing to God at all. The pride in our own hearts seeks, not to please God, but to appease God.

So where can we turn to find out about true humility, humility that seeks to please God? The prophet Micah interjects: "**He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**" Where can we find out about God-pleasing humility? Micah says, It's no secret. God has told you. For Israel, God had given them his law. Yes, there were many details in the law God gave through Moses, but it was rather easy to sum it all up in just a few words. That's what Micah does here. He says, "It's very simple." What pleases God? "**To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.**"

On the one hand, it's very easy, very simple. You won't be needing thousands of rams. You won't need to sacrifice your firstborn. And yet, even this short, simple description of what God requires is exactly the opposite of what the people of Israel had been. Society in Micah's day was known for being unjust – corruption and fraud were everywhere. In chapter three Micah says the leaders of Israel did love something, but it wasn't mercy. They loved evil. And walking humbly was exactly the opposite of trying to strike a deal with God in the previous verses. So even though these few words seem very simple, they must have led the people of Israel to this conclusion: We can't do it. We can't please God.

When we turn to God's Word to find out what pleases God, we will quickly find that we cannot. Even these short, beautiful summaries of God's law – act justly, love mercy, walk humbly – they condemn us. They lead us to the conclusion that we can't do it. On our own, we can't please God.

And so we've just learned something about God-pleasing humility. God's law brings us to the conclusion that we can't please God on our own. God's law brings us to repentance. Once we have turned from ourselves, then we can turn in faith to someone else, someone who does act justly, someone who does love mercy, and has mercy on us. Someone who walked on this earth 33 years, perfectly humble in every way. In faith we turn to Jesus, whose single sacrifice on the cross accomplished more than the blood of all the animals ever sacrificed on Israelite altars.

We can come before the Lord in true, God-pleasing humility, because we don't come bringing our own sacrifices, we don't come bringing our own good deeds, our own humility, we come with Jesus. We don't need to appease God. Jesus lived a perfectly God-pleasing life in our place and gave his life to us.

Now these simple words, "to act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God" really have new meaning for us, don't they? Now they remind us of the kind of person Jesus is, and the kind of person we'd like to be. We'd like to act justly. Why would we want to cheat or steal, or do any other injustice to our neighbor? We do love mercy, especially when we remember the mercy Jesus has shown to us, so we pass that forgiving love on to others. We want others to know Jesus' mercy and love. Perhaps that means suggesting to a friend, a neighbor, or a co-worker that maybe now is the time to come and see what you have seen. Maybe it's time to invite them to come and see the love and mercy of Jesus for themselves.

Since we have been clothed in Jesus' blood and righteousness, we also walk humbly with our God. We don't pretend that somehow we can make up for the wrong we have done. We don't try to buy God off. We live in repentance and faith.

Some years ago, country singer Mac Davis recorded a song that begins with these lyrics: "Oh Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way." It's probably the perfect example of false humility – that is, pride disguising itself as humility. When we look into our hearts we, too, find ourselves guilty of false humility. When we look into the heart of Jesus, however, we find the perfect God-pleasing humility that he earned for us. It's not about trying to appease God. It's not about trying to please God on our own. Rather, we simply walk with Jesus, and therefore, we walk humbly with our God.