

Born to Win

Religion or Faith?

by Ronald L. Dart

There is a difference between religion and faith. Now, that may be a little hard to explain, but I think it's fair to say that a lot of people have a religion who have very little in the way of faith. Their religion is a matter of ideas, arguments, positions, creeds, dogmas, and things like that. It's more about that than it is of the heart. Churches can easily become the religious equivalent of political parties—they may be conservative, they may be liberal—and theological discussions can involve as much spin as any political debate you ever heard. Churches' creeds can be just as political as any party platform. And heretics? Well, heretics are merely people who are out to change the party platform like pro-life Democrats and pro-choice Republicans. In fact, political parties are *disturbingly* like religion. And churches are disturbingly like political parties. But faith—and I mean *real faith*—has to be something entirely different from that.

For one thing, the first prerequisite of real faith is honesty. And honesty is not possible without her sister, humility. And when you think about it, *unrelenting honesty*—honesty about everything, telling the real truth all the time—leads naturally to humility because we have to get down to the real faults and the real flaws in ourselves and whatever religious system we may be a part of. And these twin sisters—humility and honesty—are conspicuous by their absence from most religious discourse. It's a lot like politics. Without humility and without honesty, you don't get faith—you get religion. And, unfortunately, most of what you encounter in this world is religion rather than faith. It's a creed. It's a dogma. It's a set of doctrines *carefully crafted* to explain God and to explain the Bible. And the problem is that every dogmatic position has its own consistencies and its contradictions which have to be explained and maintained. And, too often, they are maintained at the cost of simple honesty. It's a lot like politics. And when I thought about this, my thoughts went to a statement made by one of the Old Testament prophets. He said this:

Micah 6

AKJV

⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

The prophet was a man named Micah—about whom we know very little. But we don't need to know much about him because it's what he said to us, by the word of God, that speaks down through all the generations. And this statement has a context that speaks to us, as well. The prophet's name is Micah and the statement is found in chapter six, verse eight. And the things he says leading up to this statement about what God requires of us—to do justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with our God—it's really fascinating. It's in Micah 6, and I'll begin reading in verse six.

Micah 6

KJV

⁶ Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, *and* bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old?

⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn *for* my transgression, the fruit of my body *for* the sin of my soul?

I have sinned; I've done something bad. Maybe, maybe if I give my firstborn child—the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul—is that the deal God?

Micah 6

AKJV

⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

I can't think of anything that so *starkly* sets out the difference between religion and faith. For some people, religion is all form. It's in sacrifice. And, you know, if it's good to sacrifice one ram, then *two* rams must be better. So, let's go to *1,000* rams. And let's go to, not merely a small libation of oil, let's go to a *river* of oil that we offer for God. One thing people have a hard time getting their minds around is the simple matter that God is not pleased with *mere form*. After all, it was God who commanded sacrifice, wasn't it? Well, how can he command sacrifice and then not be pleased with it? The answer is that it becomes religion without faith; it is form without substance. Now, that's not to say that there's anything wrong with form, but the point of sacrifices was not to gain favor with God—it was to play out on the stage of the temple his plan. It was to reveal things, to explain things, to give understanding of God to man. The form of a religion is its message. But the message is not the faith. The faith exists in *a life lived*. Listen to where Micah takes this prophecy after having made this statement about what God requires of us. He said:

Micah 6

AKJV

⁹ The LORD's voice cries to the city, and the man of wisdom shall see your name: hear you the rod, and who has appointed it.

¹⁰ Are there yet the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked, and the scant measure that is abominable?

¹¹ Shall I count them pure with the wicked balances, and with the bag of deceitful weights?

You know what he's talking about here? He's talking about a merchant who goes into the temple, offers his sacrifices with all generosity, but then he goes out and goes right down the street to begin to conduct his business. And he's got a bag of weights. He puts up a balance. He puts a measure of wheat in the one side, puts one of his balance things in the other and says, "Well, here's an ounce of this or two ounces or a pound of that." *But his weights are not honest*. They're hollowed out on the inside and he gives you three-quarters of a pound for a pound. Here's the question: Is all of your religious acts—all of your form of your religion—is that sufficient? Or does it have to come down to *honesty* and *justice* and being *fair* with people and your dealings with them? Your religion somehow has to reveal itself on the ground—in the life lived.

Think carefully about this: How easy is it to walk through the *form* of your religion? Is it just a matter of going to church? Is it just a matter of showing up—doing the prayers, singing the hymns, bowing when you're *supposed* to bow, kneeling when you're *supposed* to kneel—and then, when you go out, that was your religion? Do you have any difficulty in imagining a man who would kill the prescribed animals in the form of his worship, who would then go to his shop on Main Street and cheat his customers? No, you don't have any trouble imagining that at all, do you? And the chances are, you know people who are like that. Would to God that you are not one of them yourself. This man's religion is all form and no faith—no real belief in God as judge who will plead the cause of the innocent.

Micah 6

AKJV

¹¹ Shall I count them pure with the wicked balances, and with the bag of deceitful weights?

¹² For the rich men thereof are full of violence, and the inhabitants thereof have spoken lies, and their tongue is deceitful in their mouth.

Mind you, every one of the people described here is a *religious person*, but their religion is all form and no substance. So how will God respond to this? In verse 13 he says this:

Micah 6

AKJV

- ¹³ Therefore also will I make you sick in smiting you, in making you desolate because of your sins.
¹⁴ You shall eat, but not be satisfied; and your casting down shall be in the middle of you; and you shall take hold, but shall not deliver; and that which you deliver will I give up to the sword.
¹⁵ You shall sow, but you shall not reap; you shall tread the olives, but you shall not anoint you with oil; and sweet wine, but shall not drink wine.
¹⁶ For the statutes of Omri are kept, and all the works of the house of Ahab, and you walk in their counsels; that I should make you a desolation, and the inhabitants thereof an hissing: therefore you shall bear the reproach of my people.

“Ah, well, see there”, I can hear someone say, “This is all about the Jews in the Old Testament. It doesn’t have any significance to *me*.” Dream on, foolish man. The argument is not that the scripture is *about* you. The argument is that the scripture is *like* you. Man hasn’t changed; God hasn’t changed; and the outcome of the prophecy won’t change, either. But there’s more to the context of this passage that I have even touched on yet.

Leading up to this statement about religion that is all form and no substance, God has this to say. It’s in chapter six, verse one of Micah.

Micah 6

AKJV

- ¹ Hear you now what the LORD said; Arise, contend you before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice.
² Hear you, O mountains, the LORD’s controversy, and you strong foundations of the earth: for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel.
³ O my people, what have I done to you? and wherein have I wearied you? testify against me.

“Come on, stand up and tell me what I’ve done wrong”, God says, “Where have I come up short?”

Micah 6

AKJV

- ⁴ For I brought you up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of servants; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.

Now, it is odd, but God seems to be asking them, “Do you think that sacrificing a bunch of animals is repayment for all that I have done for you? Do you think that that’s all I expect of you, because I rescued you from a life of slavery and gave you this land that flows with milk and honey? You think *all* you owe me for that is a few rams in sacrifice every year, but you don’t have to change the way you live your life?” It’s as though religious observance is *enough*. You see what I’m driving at? God says, “All Israel seems to think is that all they know me is some kind of religious observance, and that it has nothing to do with the way you live your life.” The prophet Micah saw all this and God spoke to him about it. The way his prophecy starts is *chilling*. If you go all the way back to chapter one, verse one:

Micah 1

AKJV

- ¹ The word of the LORD that came to Micah the Morasthite in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah, which he saw concerning Samaria and Jerusalem.

Now, if you think that you're safe in dismissing these prophecies because they're written only to Jews of long ago, consider this: It's not a question of whether we *are* these people. It's a question of whether we are *like* these people.

Micah 6

AKJV

² Hear, all you people; listen, O earth, and all that therein is: and let the Lord GOD be witness against you, the LORD from his holy temple.

³ For, behold, the LORD comes forth out of his place, and will come down, and tread on the high places of the earth.

⁴ And the mountains shall be molten under him, and the valleys shall be cleft, as wax before the fire, and as the waters that are poured down a steep place.

⁵ For the transgression of Jacob is all this, and for the sins of the house of Israel. [...]

Micah—though he is speaking out of a clear historical context to a specific people—his prophecy reaches all the way down through time to the imagery of the return of Christ. Because this imagery—of the Lord coming down out of his holy place, treading upon the high places of the earth, and melting the mountains—is imagery of the Day of the Lord, of the return of Christ, and of the end of the age. Chapter two (And I'll be switching here to the New International Version).

Micah 2

NIV

¹ Woe to those who plan iniquity,
to those who plot evil on their beds!
At morning's light they carry it out
because it is in their power to do it.

² They covet fields and seize them,
and houses, and take them.
They defraud people of their homes,
they rob them of their inheritance.

Why do they do this? It's interesting. He says here, they do—they carry it out—*because they can*. It's the most astonishing indictment. You can understand a man who steals bread because he's hungry, can't you? You can stand a man who steals something because he wants or because he needs it. But here are men who are *already* wealthy people—who *already* have plenty—try to *steal more*. Why? *Because they can*. The whole thing is just a game to them. Why do people kill other people? Sometimes, it's because they can. In verse three, he says:

Micah 2

NIV

³ Therefore, the LORD says:
“I am planning disaster against this people, [...]”

“They've sat around and they've planned their disasters for others. I'm going to plan disaster for them:”

Micah 2

NIV

³ “[...] from which you cannot save yourselves.
You will no longer walk proudly,
for it will be a time of calamity.

⁴ In that day people will ridicule you;

they will taunt you with this mournful song:
‘We are utterly ruined;
my people’s possession is divided up.
He takes it from me!
He assigns our fields to traitors.’”

You know, Micah is sometimes hard to understand—there are allusions in his book to practices long since dead—but still, there are parts of it that speak *distinctly* to our generation. In verse six, for example:

Micah 2

NIV

6 “Do not prophesy,” their prophets say.
“Do not prophesy about these things;
disgrace will not overtake us.”

“We don’t want to hear it.” You know, someone can stand up and tell us where we’re going or what’s about to happen to us and we’ll vilify him—demonize him—because we don’t want to hear it. You look around our society, even today, for a moralist—for someone who will really stand up for the truth, someone who will really tell us which direction we’re going and what’s right and what’s wrong—and they’ll make fun of him.

Micah 2

NIV

7 You descendants of Jacob, should it be said,
“Is the Spirit of the LORD impatient [*angry*]?
Does he do such things?”

“Do not my words do good
to the one whose ways are upright?”

8 Lately my people have risen up
like an enemy.
You strip off the rich robe
from those who pass by without a care,
like men returning from battle.

9 You drive the women of my people
from their pleasant homes.
You take away my blessing
from their children forever.

10 Get up, go away!
For this is not your resting place,
because it is defiled,
it is ruined, beyond all remedy.

11 If a liar and deceiver comes and says,
‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’
that would be just the prophet for this people!”

You know, that’s really about where we are—that the prophet who would come along and prophesy for us, “Plenty of wine! Plenty of beer!”—that’s exactly the sort of thing we’d want to hear. You know, these old prophecies are like poetry, and what follows is full of imagery. Some of it is lost to us, but still some of it speaks quite clearly down through the ages. Chapter three, verse one:

Micah 3

NIV

- ¹ Then I said,
- “Listen, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel.
Should you not embrace justice,
- ² you who hate good and love evil;
who tear the skin from my people
and the flesh from their bones;
- ³ who eat my people’s flesh,
strip off their skin
and break their bones in pieces;
who chop them up like meat for the pan,
like flesh for the pot?”
- ⁴ Then they will cry out to the LORD,
but he will not answer them.
At that time he will hide his face from them
because of the evil they have done.

Man, this is powerfully written. And when you understand what he’s saying here...this is all imagery; it’s metaphor. I don’t think he’s talking about cannibalism or anything of the sort. But he’s just talking about the way people *abuse* one another; and people who are already wealthy, who are stripping the poor of what they have left; people who would use the law and the legal system to take away unjustly the property of a person; this type of thing—the abuse of people who are powerless—which is done all the time in the world at large, and all around the world, and here as much as anywhere. And God says, “Do you think I’m just going to overlook this forever and that I am never going to ever do anything about it?” He says the time is coming when some of these people:

Micah 3

NIV

- ⁴ [...] will cry out to the Lord,
but he will not answer them.
At that time he will hide his face from them
because of the evil they have done.
- ⁵ This is what the Lord says:
- “As for the prophets
who lead my people astray,
they proclaim ‘peace’
if they have something to eat,
but prepare to wage war against anyone
who refuses to feed them.”

I mean, how in the world can you ever get an honest prophet—how can you get an honest statement out of people—if you were reward the prophets for telling you the lies and you punish him for telling you the truth? You know, I’m astonished at every political campaign in this country. I watch politicians...I remember one in particular leading up to the last election who, week-in and week-out was on from time to time as one of the talking heads on the cable TV channels that talk about politics (all politics, all the time) and I really liked the guy. He was very honest and straightforward. And all of a sudden he declared that he was running for presidency, and you’d have thought somebody flipped a switch in the back of his head and turned *him* off and turned *a politician* on. From then on he realized why he was doing it. It was because if

he just simply was himself and told the truth, he would be punished. If he would spin and get his story just right, he might get elected. It's the way things go. Verse nine:

Micah 3

NIV

- ⁹ Hear this, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel,
who despise justice
and distort all that is right;
- ¹⁰ who build Zion with bloodshed,
and Jerusalem with wickedness.
- ¹¹ Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.
Yet they look for the LORD's support and say,
"Is not the LORD among us?
No disaster will come upon us."
- ¹² Therefore because of you,
Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

And it happened—not once, but twice—because people just couldn't learn the lesson.

It's amazing to me, at times, how these prophets can speak down through the ages like they can, and how apt their prophecies are even to the modern world. But their vision was long. They saw *way* into the future. Micah, for example, in chapter four, verse one says this:

Micah 4

NIV

- ¹ In the last days
- the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and peoples will stream to it.
- ² Many nations will come and say,
- "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."
The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
- ³ He will judge between many peoples
and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Wow, we're looking down to a period of time when *God* has come to this earth; when he has established peace; when he's, with a strong hand, put an end to war everywhere around the world.

Micah 4

NIV

- ⁴ Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
for the LORD Almighty has spoken.
- ⁵ All the nations may walk
in the name of their gods,
but we will walk in the name of the LORD
our God for ever and ever.

Hey, we're not there yet; this is something to look forward to. But along the way there are still some very hard times. Micah 4, verse nine:

Micah 4

NIV

- ⁹ Why do you now cry aloud—
have you no king?
Has your ruler perished,
that pain seizes you like that of a woman in labor?
- ¹⁰ Writhe in agony, Daughter Zion,
like a woman in labor,
for now you must leave the city
to camp in the open field.
You will go to Babylon;
there you will be rescued.
There the LORD will redeem you
out of the hand of your enemies.

It's fascinating that, right in the middle of all this, with that *long view* that the prophets have, Micah says this:

Micah 5

NIV

- ² "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times."

Christians universally understand this as a prophecy of the Messiah and of Christ, who is *going to* become the ruler over Israel but whose origins are from old—from ancient times. This was foretold long ago. Israel will be abandoned:

Micah 5

ESV

- ³ [...] until the time
when she who is in labor has given birth;

- then the rest of his brothers shall return
to the people of Israel.
- 4 And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth.
- 5 And he shall be their peace. [...]

Why, this is simple Christian doctrine. And, you know, returning to the thought I had the beginning of this program, where people can't seem to draw the distinction between religion on the one hand and faith on the other—that a religion which has all form and no substance, a religion in which we go to church but it doesn't affect our daily lives, doesn't take us anywhere. It leaves us cut off from God, and God eventually is going to have to take a hand himself. And the prophet indicates that that hand that's going to be taken, is going to be taken by one whom you and I have come to know as Jesus Christ. Micah ends his prophecy in chapter seven, verse 16 with this:

Micah 7

NIV

- 16 Nations will see and be ashamed,
deprived of all their power.
They will put their hands over their mouths
and their ears will become deaf.
- 17 They will lick dust like a snake,
like creatures that crawl on the ground.
They will come trembling out of their dens;
they will turn in fear to the LORD our God
and will be afraid of you.
- 18 Who is a God like you,
who pardons sin and forgives the transgression
of the remnant of his inheritance?
You do not stay angry forever
but delight to show mercy.
- 19 You will again have compassion on us;
you will tread our sins underfoot
and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.
- 20 You will be faithful to Jacob,
and show love to Abraham,
as you pledged on oath to our ancestors
in days long ago.

You know, when you look at these prophecies and you consider their meaning, the real question in the end is not going to be our religion; it's going to be *our faith*. It's going to fall out in whether we will be true to God as he has been true to us.

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