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Between the Ideal and the Real: We Often Struggle to Live God's Kingdom Values

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Between the Ideal and the Real

We often struggle to live God's kingdom values.

Things were so easy in the beginning. Adam and Eve were to care for the earth and the garden they had been placed in. Since they had been created in God's image and likeness, they would reflect God's goodness, His holiness, and, ultimately, His character to all creation surrounding them.

It never happened. Sin separated humanity from God. The Fall brought pain, death, abuse, jealousy, violence, hunger for power and dominion, and so many more evil attitudes to this world. The descendants of Adam and Eve became their own worst enemies.

God had a plan to return His lost children to the garden. He called a people to be His and to shine His light in a dark world (Isa. 49:6). He gave them signs and illustrations of His plan of salvation (think, for example, the Sabbath or the sanctuary); His laws reflected His character and illustrated His kingdom values in practical ways. How children should relate to their parents and vice versa; how fidelity results in happy marriages; how murder, stealing, gossip, and coveting were destructive to any social fabric were urged. God admonished them to care for widows, orphans, outsiders, and those who are powerless, and to administer justice fairly. Deuteronomy 10:12-22 offers a good summary of these principles of God's law (cf. also Ex. 22:16-31).

Reality, however, looked different in biblical Israel. For hundreds of years, Israel's prophets spoke out against abuse and unethical behavior. "Her [Judah's] heads judge for a bribe, her priests teach for pay, and her prophets divine for money. Yet they lean on the Lord, and say, 'Is not the Lord among us? No harm can come upon us'" (Micah 3:11). God repeatedly spoke through His prophets against the attitudes and actions

of His people. "For if you [Judah] thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever" (Jer. 7:5-7).

Israel clearly struggled with idolatry (cf. 1 Kings 12:25-33; 16:29-33; etc.), but God's most recurring accusations involved their ethical lapses and their belief that unethical behavior could be balanced out by abundant sacrifices (Hosea 6:4-6; Micah 6:6-8). The God of Scripture cannot be manipulated by a pious display of religious action or lavish giving. Listen to the rush of His voice ringing right into the twenty-first century: "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:21-24). ©

Gerald A. Klingbeil is an associate editor of *Adventist World*.

