

WITH LIBERTY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL

SERIES: WHO IS A GOD LIKE THEE?

By Doug Goins

In Matthew 15:18, Jesus said, “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart.” Our authentic, heartfelt beliefs about faith are expressed in our words and in our works. If you want to know what my Christianity is really about, don’t just listen to me in the pulpit, but pay attention to my conversation and my behavior all week. That’s how you’ll really see my heart. God is always looking at our hearts.

This week I had a conversation about heart issues with some guys who meet to study the Scriptures on Wednesday nights. One of the men, Randy, was telling us of a couple of interactions he and his wife have had with their three-year-old son Nicolas, about the heart. Nicolas is very involved here in Sunday school every Sunday morning as well as the mid-week children’s program, so he’s getting a lot of Christian education. Randy told us that his wife, Kelly, had lunch with a dear friend, a Jewish lady who does not know the Lord. Her daughter Mara, also three, is one of Nicolas’ friends. In the middle of lunch, Nicolas said very loudly to his mother, “Does Mara have a heart?” And Kelly replied, “Yes.” He followed up with, “Does she have Jesus in her heart?” Now, that was certainly an embarrassing question to ask in front of a Jewish mother about her three-year-old daughter!

What struck me about this conversation is what a great little heart Nicolas has at age three. He is open and honest, his heart is tender, soft and inquisitive about who Jesus is. This little boy is thinking about God’s expression of love through the Bible as he is learning in Sunday school, trying to understand truth as Jesus has revealed it. The tragedy comes when we grow out of being like a little child toward God and toward his loving communication in the Scriptures. Even belonging to him, we can become tough, self-sufficient, resistant to his truth. Jesus saw this in the Pharisees who are mentioned in the Matthew 15 passage read earlier. Jesus called it “hard-heartedness.” Quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, Jesus challenged religious activity with no spiritual source, no transformed heart: “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men” (Matthew 15:8-9). The gospels consistently tell us that in response to that hard-heartedness, Jesus grieved, lamented and mourned over the sinful self-delusion of those religious leaders in Israel and the people who followed them.

The Old Testament prophet Micah struggled with the same issues during his thirty-year ministry in Judah as God’s spokesman during the eighth century before Jesus. Chapters 1 and 2 of Micah form a literary unit, a collection of sermons that Micah gave early in his ministry to the nation. In the first message, Micah warns that God’s judgment is coming both on the northern kingdom of Israel and on the southern kingdom of Judah. He tried to call his nation back to repentance, back to faithful worship of God, to heartfelt obedience to God’s covenant, back to the truth of God’s revealed word in the Scriptures. But the people refused to listen to him. He pled for social justice, for a sincere concern for the helpless who lived among them, but the people wouldn’t repent. Micah grieved, he mourned, he lamented the sin of his people and also God’s just judgment that was coming on the land. God views us as his church in the same way that he viewed Israel, his chosen people. We are to be a holy people, as was Israel. Our God takes it just as seriously when he witnesses sinful attitudes and activity in us, when he sees us rebelling against the things that we know to be true, rejecting his wonderful revelation. Today, we are called to repentance just like Israel was. When we recognize sin in ourselves and are unwilling to deal with it, then judgment is just as sure on us individually as it is collectively.

The day after my message on Micah chapter 1, I received a card from a sister in our body who did not know I was preaching on Micah, nor did she know that my emphasis had been on lament. She has been out of the state for several months now, providing hospice care for her sister-in-law who is dying of cancer. Her sister-in-law doesn’t

know the Lord, and she went partly to provide physical care, but also hoping she could lead her to Christ. Here is what she wrote, unaware of what we talked about last Sunday morning:

We could use continued prayer as we minister to my sister-in-law. The ordeal she is going through is numbing, endless, and seemingly hopeless. Science and medicine can't cure her. God isn't intervening to save her physically or spiritually, it seems. I told her I'd die in her place if I could. Whatever measure of days I have seems a small gift. The knowledge of God, eternal life and eternal damnation is a burden looking into her gaunt face and pleading eyes. Please pray.

This woman understands lament. She is identifying with a person lost in trespasses and sins.

In chapter 2, Micah gets very specific about the sins that were introduced in the first chapter. He has spoken of the rebellion of Jacob, the sins of the house of Israel, and her idolatry as the issues that are triggering God's judgment. This week he explains what the specific sins are, this rebellion of which she is guilty. Micah makes two main points in this section. One concerns materialism, Judah's premeditated pattern of coveting. The second sin is an unwillingness to hear truth, at least hard truth, including rejecting God's message through his spokesman.

Materialism

The first two verses of chapter 2 focus on this sin of materialism. Coming right out of the heart, it's rooted in what he calls covetousness. Greed and oppression prevail in their society.

**Woe to those who scheme iniquity,
Who work out evil on their beds!
When morning comes, they do it,
For it is in the power of their hands.
They covet fields and then seize them,
And houses, and take them away.
They rob a man and his house,
A man and his inheritance. (Micah 2:1, 2)**

The affluent people of Judah are working dishonestly to increase their wealth. They are using force and fraud in the court system. The spiritual problem is that these greedy people covet in their hearts things which belong to other people. This is direct rebellion against the word of God. The last of the Ten Commandments says: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Exodus 20:17). Coveting means that I want something that belongs to another person. It means that I am not really satisfied with what God has given me, which is ingratitude. The commandment makes it clear that I am not to covet people, meaning neither relationships I see around me, nor material possessions. In both cases it's a heart issue. Covetousness exists inside of me. It's in my thought life long before it ever expresses itself in any kind of outward action.

What Micah calls scheming, this lustful planning in verse 1, results in people doing whatever it takes to get what they want. They love the physical blessing of the land that God has given them much more than they love him, the provider of the gift. This iniquity meant ignoring the fact that God owns the land and he had given it to each family in Israel forever. The covetous were forcing people out of their homes, off the inheritance of their land, into destitution. Micah probably knew the stories, names and faces of people from his hometown of Morasheth who had lost everything.

The Consequences of Coveting

The next three verses tell us that while the covetous are planning their sinful activity, God is planning as well. Micah focuses on the consequences, what God has in mind for idolatrous, covetous people. Beginning in verse 3,

**Therefore, thus says the LORD,
“Behold, I am planning [It’s the same word in chapter one, “scheming” or “planning”] against this family a calamity
From which you cannot remove your necks;
And you will not walk haughtily,
For it will be an evil time.**

Judgment is coming, God says. It’s inescapable and it will be humiliating.

**On that day they will take up against you a taunt
And utter a bitter lamentation and say,
‘We are completely destroyed!
He exchanges the portion of my people;
How He removes it from me!
To the apostate [the Gentiles] He apportions our fields.’**

As powerful and ruthless as these people are, they will end up in total despair, being taunted for having lost everything.

**Therefore, you will have no one stretching a measuring line
For you by lot in the assembly of the LORD. (Micah 2:3-5)**

Ultimately they will be excluded from the family, or community of people they have exploited.

This is a frightening summary of these covetous people, who will reap what they have sown. This dreadful harvest of their sins will appear one day, even though they find it hard to believe right now. Self-confidence and pride will be stripped from them. Their authority will be gone, holdings torn from their possession, and they will see everything they’ve lived and worked for, and sinned to acquire, ripped out of their grasp. The Assyrian and then the Babylonian invaders will take all of their possessions, and the people who survive will be taken off to exile. They will die apart from their home land, but will also be separated from all the property around which they have built their life.

As you consider this, you may think, “Well, this really doesn’t apply to me. I’m not a robber-baron! I’m not a slumlord!” But if you’re honest, you’ve got to admit that this tenth commandment makes you uncomfortable, because every one of us is a little bit covetous at the core. Perhaps you have concern about financial resources, either from not having enough or how you’re going to manage what you do have. Maybe you are afraid of losing what you own. Joe Lewis, the heavyweight boxing champion remarked, “I don’t actually like money all that much, but it does quiet my nerves.” We laugh because we can relate!

We are immersed in a consumer culture that is driven by coveting. The advertising industry knows our weakness, and how to convince us to acquire more and more, and follow the style trends so we can look like all the beautiful people in the ads and catalogs. One sad manifestation of this right now is that coveting is being justified in the name of patriotism. If you want to be a “real American,” then spend money and shop. Ford Motor Company, with big American flags in its commercials, wants us to believe that the way to be a real American is to buy a Ford, preferably a truck!

I am not immune to all of this. I’ve struggled with this in many different ways throughout the years. One embarrassing example is early in my marriage to Candy, I would get excited when I received Ed McMahan’s letter promising me that I had won \$10,000,000. I used to fill out all those forms religiously and return them. It was very laborious and time-consuming, but it appealed to my compulsive, detail nature. And I never won a cent! You probably know what that feels like, don’t you? How many of you have felt a sense of envy or covetousness when

you saw the new house that friends built or the new car they bought because they cashed in stock options or received an inheritance?

The Bible is sharply counter-cultural. The apostle Paul encourages us to be content with what we have. He warns that the fixation on being wealthy will just bring senseless and hurtful desires that will lead to destruction. He wrote about this to the young pastor, Timothy.

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. (1 Timothy 6:6-10)

That the materialistic people of Judah didn't listen to Micah's message of warning. As a result, in Paul's words, they were "plunged" into "ruin and destruction." The good news for us today is that we can stop and listen to what God has to say. We can confess whatever covetousness God may have revealed to us. We can repent of whatever materialism or idolatry may have come to light. Wanting to hang on to what we have, or obsessing about what we don't have—either way it's idolatry. We can ask the Lord to help us cultivate what Paul calls godliness, contentment, and gratitude.

I was convicted a few years ago by a sermon of John Stott's, *The Christian and the Poor*. Listen to what he has to say about this issue.

Materialism is an obsession with material things. Asceticism is the denial of the good gifts of the Creator. Pharisee-ism is binding ourselves and other people with rules. Instead, we should stick with principles. The principle of simplicity is clear. Simplicity is the first cousin of contentment. Its motto is "we brought nothing into this world and we can certainly carry nothing out." It recognizes that we are pilgrims. It concentrates on what we need and it measures this by what we use. It rejoices in the good things of creation but hates waste and greed and clutter. It knows how easily the seed of the word is smothered by the cares and riches of this life. It wants to be free from distractions in order to love and serve God and others. (1)

That is the godliness of grateful contentment.

Religious Lies

It shouldn't surprise us that Micah's message didn't go over well with his audience in Judah. The next section exposes Judah's pattern of rejecting God's word. The people preferred religious lies, that is, lies spoken by religious people as if they were speaking for God. Micah was committed to speaking truth in spite of opposition. He knew that nobody else would tell the truth if he didn't, and he knew how high the stakes were for his people.

"Do not speak out," so they speak out.

But if they do not speak out [if the prophets of God do not speak] concerning these things, Reproaches will not be turned back. (Micah 2:6)

The opposition wants this godly prophet to stop speaking immediately. The challenge in the first line of verse 6 does not use the normal word for prophecy or preaching. It's a derogatory term meaning "to drip or flow." They are probably making fun of Micah or some other godly prophet who over-enthusiastically is spitting or sputtering as he talks. A literal Hebrew reading of verse 6 would be: First, the charge of the opposition: "*Do not give sputtering prophecy, they sputter.*" Then, Micah's rebuttal: "*They are not sputtering prophecies concerning these things. Shame will not be removed.*"

These “things” were spelled out in verses 3-5: the irreversible judgment of God is coming. But Micah has to keep speaking out. He’s got to keep telling the truth about God as the righteous judge, the phrase that we saw last week. We also saw God as “the witness of all the earth.” Nothing escapes his vision. Micah has got to keep speaking, even though judgment is not a commercially-viable message. People won’t flock to hear it. In our country right now, *The Prayer of Jabez* is a best-seller, but it wouldn’t be if the message were: “I am planning against this family a calamity. It will be an evil time.” That doesn’t sell a lot of books in any day or age.

The Consequences of Rationalization

Beginning in verse 7, Micah warns Israel of the dangerous result of embracing religious lies. One thing that happens is that we rationalize or justify, which lets us hold onto our rebellion, sustaining the sinful lifestyle. The danger is that our doctrine of God becomes unbalanced. We overemphasize his patience, we undervalue justice, and our character suffers.

**“Is it being said, O house of Jacob:
‘Is the Spirit of the LORD impatient?
Are these His doings?’
Do not My words do good
To the one walking uprightly?”** (Micah 2:7)

Micah’s opponents are claiming that God won’t do the kinds of things that Micah is predicting, because “he’s not really an angry God.” They want to focus on the Old Testament scriptures that emphasize God as patient, long-suffering, compassionate, merciful, and slow to anger. And Micah responds in that verse, “Yes, they are half right, but they are also half wrong.” God and his word are good. But his goodness and his blessing are experienced only by the upright, not universally by every group. God says in Exodus 23:7, “I will not acquit the guilty,” and in Exodus 34:7, “He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.” In Joshua 24:20, Joshua warned, “If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign Gods, He will turn and bring disaster on you. And make an end of you after He has been good to you.” That’s what Judah didn’t want to believe.

There is danger for us as well as we consider this, because we can adopt the same optimistic approach to God as Judah did, deliberately overlooking one whole aspect of God’s character and his activity. We can remake the Creator into a humanly synthesized and sanitized version of a great, jolly, loving, Santa Claus. However, that is not true in biblical revelation, it’s never been true in history, and it’s not true in personal experience. It’s a religious lie which will allow us to continue in our sin, figuring we can get away with it.

Next, Micah exposes their shameful activity, which made them literally enemies of God. They had developed a lifestyle of victimizing or taking advantage of other people. Their sinful choices, made gradually over time, brought them to the point where they were altogether unaware of sin.

**Recently My people have arisen as an enemy—
You strip the robe off the garment,
From unsuspecting passers-by,
From those returned from war.
The women of My people you evict,
Each one from her pleasant house.
From her children you take
My splendor forever.** (Micah 2:8, 9)

God pictures this rebellion as an attack on two peaceful Israelites, fellow citizens, family members, kinsmen. They are defenseless. One is in civilian clothing and another is perhaps a returning military veteran, perhaps wounded in battle and unable to defend himself. Even worse is the treatment of the widows of the land. In an echo of verse 2,

we hear about a widow who has perhaps lost a husband in war. She'll have difficulty maintaining her home and her land without her husband. She'll soon find herself overwhelmed by debt, so she'll go to a moneylender to help alleviate the problem. But she will end up being driven from her inheritance along with her children. It is very impersonal and dehumanizing. It's heartless to end up treating your own people that way.

Judgment is pronounced

In verse 10, Micah proclaims the consequences again, that judgment will come. For the people in Judah it will be physical death, but I think we can look beyond to the spiritual death that enters into relationships.

**Arise and go,
For this is no place of rest
Because of the uncleanness that brings on destruction,
A painful destruction.**

When God brought the people into the land, he had promised rest, security and safety, but their sinful failures nullified that hope. They are going to have no rest, no inheritance, no part even in the future Messianic rest that God's going to bring his people, because their sin has made the land unclean. It is ruined and beyond hope and it's going to be abandoned because they have destroyed innocent people to whom God gave the land. They will never again enjoy its blessing and they will be driven from it.

It happened literally to the nations of Israel, but it happens to us in all kinds of relational, emotional and spiritual ways. Sinful choices hung onto, clung to, and pursued at all cost result in all kinds of destruction and devastation. Relationships are broken, families are torn apart, trust is betrayed. I know so many people who live with consequences that will never go away in terms of broken relationships. Children of divorce never get over being children of divorce. The wages of sin is death, the Bible says. The good news is that God can give life even in the face of death. We'll examine that in verses 12 and 13.

Look at the last verse in this section about the consequences of embracing religious lies. Here's where the word "lies" appears. We end up listening to anything but spiritual reality. We actually thirst for lies. That's what we want to hear because we are so hardened to the truth of God.

**If a man walking after wind and falsehood
Had told lies and said,
"I will speak out to you concerning wine and liquor,"
He would be spokesman to this people. (Micah 2:11)**

They would make him a prophet. The people of Judah placed tremendous emphasis on enjoying the fruits of their affluent society. They were obsessed with the good life.

My conscience was pricked a bit as I thought about this, because it sounds a lot like us. We love to talk about the latest boutique wine, the latest label that we've found. We talk about the newest brewpub and we compare beers. There is an entire "beer vocabulary" out there! Micah is suggesting here, ironically, that if somebody were to preach in Judah of greater affluence, of prosperity, even give a sermon on the art of wine- and beer-making, they would listen to him and he would have instant spiritual credibility as a spokesman for God.

In contrast, Micah is speaking hard truth, and it's unacceptable to the people who are basking in the affluence of eighth-century Judah. Tragically, they are rejecting the very words of God. They are like the Pharisees of Jesus' day—they have hardened hearts. Religious lies make more sense to them than spiritual reality. And it's an issue for us, as well. Consider what you enjoy listening to, the truth that you cultivate, in terms of what you read, what you watch on television or listen to on the radio. What kind of religious input do you get in your life? Do you resist God's word that you find harsh, demanding or even insensitive? Do you resist the parts that don't make you feel

good about yourself? Do you prefer religious lies to spiritual authenticity? The Spirit of God will have to help you untangle that.

A message of hope and consolation

In the opening two chapters of Micah, the faithful prophet has proclaimed the word of God. He has exposed sin and has announced judgment. He also has to provide hope and consolation for people who receive his message and turn to God because consolation, if there's no true repentance, is only false hope. It's saying "peace, peace," when there isn't any peace. But conviction without any hope just creates hopelessness. It's like performing radical surgery without the healing process of after-care. So Micah closes the message with wonderful hope. God has promised to deliver his remnant—people who are broken and tender and responsive to him. This is the aftermath of judgment.

**I will surely assemble all of you, Jacob.
I will surely gather the remnant of Israel.
I will put them together like sheep in the fold;
Like a flock in the midst of its pasture
They will be noisy [that's the noise of celebration and joy] with men.
The breaker goes up before them;
They break out, pass through the gate, and go out by it.
So their king goes on before them,
And the LORD at their head. (Micah 2:12-13)**

He's promising these people a fullness, a completeness of salvation, deliverance, restoration. He is addressing the entire nation: "All of you, Jacob, Israel." And Micah's hope isn't just centered in his own lifetime. I don't think he's just looking at the return of exiles seventy years after being taken into captivity, although I think that is partially in view. He is also looking far ahead to the Messianic kingdom, a kingdom that is still in our future, because it is then that Israel's true hopes are going to be finally and completely realized. And until that glorious day, God is going to deal with the remnant of his people. The majority of the nation is going to rebel against God, but there will always be a faithful remnant: a people who are broken and repentant, who hear the Lord, who trust him and seek to do his will.

This is also true today of the professing church. Within the institutional church spread around the world, there is a confessing church, a remnant who loves Jesus wholeheartedly. A weak and weary remnant did return to Judah after the Babylonian captivity, but Israel has never become the great, unified, restored nation that all the prophets promised, including Micah. That will happen when the Lord returns to claim his people and establish his kingdom. The leader of that restoration will be the Messiah King, the one who breaks open the way as he opens the doors that confine the Jews in the various nations, so he can bring them back to their land. Micah describes it as a triumphant procession, much like the procession when God led his people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. It is led by the Lord God, but also by the Messiah King, together at the head of all redeemed people. This vision will be expanded in chapters 3-5. It is wonderfully encouraging and motivating to know that God has a future plan and purpose no matter how difficult times are right now. Even if innocent people get swept up into the judgment caused by the sin of others, good will win out. We can trust God for his faithfulness and his goodness. He will save the remnant who walk uprightly before him.

We've already seen that this very first message, encompassing two chapters, aroused opposition in the people. It didn't change their hearts. So now, in the next three chapters, Micah is going to preach a message of hope and promise: "This deliverer King is coming, He's unstoppable in the salvation He brings."

Before we move on, we need to deal with our own hearts and the idols that may have found a place there. Whatever sin we've been convicted of—covetousness, selfishness, our willingness to believe religious lies—we've got to abandon "soft religion," religion that pampers our pride and makes it easy for us to sin. Why? Because God

hasn't changed. The New Testament writer of Hebrews tells those of us who are in Christ, part of His body, the church, that "our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). The Lord shall judge his people. Peter wrote in his first letter, "For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God" (1 Peter 4:17).

Again, it a heart issue. Jesus made that very clear in Matthew 15:18-19: "The things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, slanders." That pretty well covers the accusations of Micah 1 and 2, doesn't it? The prophet Ezekiel promises that God in Christ is the one who can forgive us of sin, who can cleanse us from unrighteousness, and who can give us a new heart. Listen to the promise,

Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
(Ezekiel 36:25-26)

Do you want a heart like that? Do you want a soft heart like three-year-old Nicolas, a heart that is open, honest, tender, inquisitive, submissive, obedient? You can ask God to do it and he will. He'll do it right now if you are willing to be honest with him about the truth that has penetrated your heart.

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NOTES:

(1) John Stott, *The Christian and the Poor*. All Souls Church, London, England. February 16, 1981.

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Micah 2:1-13

2nd Message

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