

PERVERTED POLITICIANS, PROPHETS AND PASTORS

SERIES: WHO IS A GOD LIKE THEE?

By Doug Goins

This chapter in the book of Micah requires us to examine our own hearts and attitudes toward the poor, those who don't have the same advantages that we do in our community. This chapter constitutes an indictment of the national leadership in the kingdom of Judah in the eighth century before Christ. The civil, judicial, and religious leaders in Judah have ignored the true worship of God. He is the Lord God who shows kindness, justice, and righteousness. And he is the God of absolute holiness. He calls his people to be holy just like he is holy.

Let's now survey Micah's denunciation, beginning in verse 1 of chapter 3:

**And I said,
“Hear now, heads of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel.
Is it not for you to know justice?
“You who hate good and love evil...**

**Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets
Who lead my people astray...**

**Now hear this, heads of the house of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel,
Who abhor justice
And twist everything that is straight...**

**Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe,
Her priests instruct for a price,
And her prophets divine for money.
(Micah 3:1, 5, 9, 11)**

People in every period of history suffer injustice at the hands of the strong and the powerful. The process usually involves some segment of the population being treated unfairly so that right and wrong are forgotten. As a result, the selfish goals of the leadership can be achieved. Ethics are ignored. Decisions are not made out of a concern for the common good. No matter what the rationale or the circumstances, the Bible consistently pictures God as one who always judges inequity and fights on behalf of justice. Regardless of why leaders fail to lead in just and loving ways, the result is always social chaos.

What was true in Judah can be seen today in our society. In chapter two of Micah we saw that justice was ignored. Wealthy and powerful people used their advantage and their privileged position to take property from helpless people. Look back at chapter 2:

**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...

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 2:2, 8)

In chapter 3 we see that even Judah's leadership treats the poor inhumanely. They selectively interpret God's law to their own financial benefit. These civil leaders don't value fairness. They end up cynically demeaning justice. Judges accept bribes. Spiritual leaders are mostly concerned with how much they are being paid. At the same time, all these corrupt leaders, both political and religious, deceitfully claim to be servants of God. They say that they are protected and blessed by God in their religious institutions and political structure.

This chapter is comprised of three perfectly matched sections of four verses each. In each section, God calls the people to attention, then states the accusations—the indictments against each group of leadership—and concludes by pronouncing judgment.

Civil leaders

The first section addresses the civil leaders. God promises to remove them because of their injustice.

**And I said,
“Hear now, heads of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel.
Is it not for you to know justice?
You who hate good and love evil,
Who tear off their skin from them
And their flesh from their bones,
And who eat the flesh of my people,
Strip off their skin from them,
Break their bones,
And chop them up as for the pot
And as meat in a kettle.”
Then they [the oppressors, the corrupt leadership] will cry out
to the Lord,
But he will not answer them.
Instead, He will hide His face from them at that time,
Because they have practiced evil deeds. (Micah 3:1-4)**

Again, as we saw at the beginning of chapter 1, there is a ringing call to attention. God is demanding that the people of Judah pay close attention to him. Micah says the people have to hear what God is about to say to them through his servant. The tone conveys a tremendous sense of urgency, as though Micah has shouted, “Listen up! God is speaking! This is vitally important!” As a matter of fact, in verse 9 he says, “Now hear this!” Verse 5 begins, “Thus says the Lord...” These phrases remind me of Jesus' repeated admonition to us in the gospels, “He who has ears let him hear.” A similar challenge appears in Hebrews 3:7-8, “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” The same author warns us: “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape, who turn away from Him who warns from heaven” (Hebrews 12:25). It is a dangerous thing to turn a deaf ear to the voice of God when he speaks to us through his Word.

Look again at the accusations against the heads of the nation. Their titles all connote political and civil responsibility, positions which should ensure justice in all human relationships. Those terms were first used to describe the leaders that Moses was told to gather around him to help him administer justice and organize the people of Israel during the years of wandering in the wilderness. The qualifications for that kind of leadership are described in Exodus, chapter 18. Moses was instructed to select capable men from all the people. The leadership was to be representative, comprised of men who feared God, hated dishonest gain and had proven trustworthy. Moses appointed these kinds of leaders to official positions governing groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens. Their job included serving as judges for the people at all times. Part of the qualification is servanthood—serving the common good, for all of the people, all of the time.

In Micah's day, the governmental officials did include judges who oversaw criminal and civil trials. They passed judgment under the authority of the king of the nation, who ruled from Jerusalem. There were also tribal elders who served the nation and leadership both as military commanders and as local judges. They would settle minor disputes outside of Jerusalem.

Micah's rhetorical question at the end of verse 1 is really devastating: "Is it not for you to know justice?" If anybody ought to know the meaning of justice, it's those who have the awesome responsibility of leadership. They must be committed to fairness, to equity in governmental administration. God's dissatisfaction with the justice being carried out in Judah is clear in verses 2 and 3. The leaders hate good and love evil. And the last line of verse 4 tells us that they practiced evil deeds. Evil hearts result in evil behavior. They have turned justice on its head. They are not only allowing the wealthy to exploit the poor, but they personally participate in the exploitation as well.

The leaders are acting like shepherds who have turned to predators. Their God-given responsibility is to care for the people like a faithful shepherd, somebody who protects the flock because of its value. That was a very common metaphor in Israel and in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In the Old Testament, the king, the prophet, the priest, the judge and the elder of the tribe were all called shepherds. But Israel's rulers aren't protecting the flock. Micah says it's as if they are butchering their own sheep. They display no conscience, just a predatory desire to feed off the flock to satisfy their own hunger.

As is clear in verse 3, this injustice ignores the fact that these are God's people who are being exploited. The phrase, "My people," whenever you see it in the Old Testament, is a loving term of endearment that God uses to describe people in a covenant love relationship with him. But this ruthless leadership ignores the biblical view that every person is made in God's image, no matter how much or how little they have.

Micah warns that these governmental leaders will suffer God's judgment. Verse 4 summarizes the terror of helplessness with no hope of rescue. God's response to their unjust behavior will be silence. He will refuse to answer their prayers when they cry out for help in the face of Babylonian invasion. And just as they turned a deaf ear to the cries for mercy from their helpless victims, God won't listen to them. The punishment will fit the crime.

Preachers and Teachers

Now Micah turns his attention to the preachers and the teachers of the nation. He warns of the removal of Judah's false prophets:

**Thus says the Lord concerning the prophets
Who lead my people astray;**

**When they have something to bite with their teeth,
They cry, “Peace,”
But against him who puts nothing in their mouths,
They declare holy war.
Therefore [here comes the word of judgment:] it will be night for you—without vision,
And darkness for you—without divination.
The sun will go down on the prophets,
And the day will become dark over them.
The seers will be ashamed
And the diviners will be embarrassed.
Indeed, they will all cover their mouths
Because there is no answer from God. (Micah 3:5-7)**

Again, the section opens with God’s call to attention, “Thus says the Lord.” Remember, this is not Micah’s opinion. This is God speaking, and we have to hear it as such.

The accusation is two-fold. “My prophets lead people astray. And these prophets are teaching peace, but it is for profit.” The tragedy is that God’s covenant people are wandering aimlessly. They are being misled by these greedy spiritual leaders who are just out to get rich. These prophets are supposed to be trusted as the voice of God to his people, but their downfall is that they love money. They treat those people more favorably who happen to slip a little extra cash into their hands. These spiritual leaders are not focused on faithfully delivering God’s message to his people; they slant or misrepresent the full force of his words, based on a person’s ability to give a financial gift. So those people who give food or money to the prophets are going to receive words of peace, blessing and salvation. But those who cannot afford a gift or who may not give as much as the prophet expects, are going to receive a hostile prophecy, declaring war, death, divine judgment and hopelessness.

We are going to find as well in the next section that these prophets are also in collusion with the civil authorities in their extortion, bribery, and exploitation of the poor. In the New Testament, Paul warned the young pastor Titus of the dangerous influence of religious hucksters like these Judean prophets:

For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers...teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain....They profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient, and worthless for any good deed.
(Titus 1:10-11, 16)

What is clear from this passage is that false prophets will ultimately suffer God’s judgment. Verses 6 and 7 describe what that will be like: the humiliation of not receiving *any* word from God anymore. This is in addition to the silence of God as we saw in the judgment of the civil leaders in the opening section. It’s now absolute darkness. They will experience the blackness of God’s rejection, the loss of all spiritual perception, all enlightenment. God will not allow the prostitution of the prophetic office. They will lose all their patronage from wealthy supporters. They won’t be able to market their prophetic ministry anymore. They’ll lose their platform for preaching. These false predictions about peace are going to be discredited by the reality of the Babylonian invasion, which only brings violence.

They’ll be humiliated partly by their inability to stop God’s true prophet. Truth can never be totally stifled. In chapter 2, the opposition told Micah, “Quit preaching. Quit sputtering prophecies,” but they didn’t in any way intimidate Micah. Look at chapter 3, verse 8. In tremendous contrast to verses 5-7, Micah says personally,

**On the other hand [or in contrast] I am filled with power—
With the Spirit of the Lord—**

**And with justice and courage to make known
to Jacob his rebellious act,
Even to Israel his sin.**

The basis of the false prophet's ministry was money. The basis of Micah's ministry was divine gifting, divine empowerment. This little verse is one of the very few things that we know about Micah. He is not very self-disclosing.

Micah mentions four spiritual resources that God has given him to speak the truth. One is power, clearly the power of God. God has given him strength to persevere in the face of opposition and discouragement. Second, he says, the Spirit of the Lord fills him. In the Old Testament, one mark of being Spirit-filled was having a zeal for justice, his third resource. God had given him discernment to understand right and wrong, moral absolutes. He understood the plight of the poor and the plight of the powerful, and God gave him the ability to speak to these issues. He understood justice and he could speak to justice because his understanding came from God. Finally, God gave him courage. This great word is a military term which is always used for soldiers going into battle. Only God can give that internal fortitude to fight fear in the face of enemies and opposition.

These supernatural resources enabled Micah to communicate his message. It's not a popular message. It's not a message of peace. It's a message that identifies sin because he's convinced that the people of Judah have to hear what God thinks about their sinful hearts and their sinful behavior. The phrase "make known" in some translations, or "confront," literally means to "stand opposite;" i.e., to stand up straight and tall in opposition to what he saw as rebellion against God's authority in the nation of Judah. Micah and God are on the same wavelength, and Micah delivers God's message regardless of whether the people like it. Fear does not immobilize Micah, and favoritism doesn't in any way control his ministry.

The Priesthood

Now, we come to the last four verses of the chapter. Micah adds the priesthood to the indictment of both the civil and prophetic leaders. Again, God will remove them all from leadership.

**Now hear this, heads of the house of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel,
Who abhor justice
And twist everything that is straight,
Who build Zion with bloodshed
And Jerusalem with violent injustice.
Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe,
Her priests instruct for a price,
And her prophets divine for money.
Yet they lean on the LORD saying,
"Is not the Lord in our midst?
Calamity will not come upon us."
[And then the word of judgment]
Therefore, on account of you,
Zion will be plowed as a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins,
And the mountain of the temple will become high places of a forest. (Micah 3:9-12)**

This leadership collectively faces four accusations. The first is perversion. That word shows up in the second half of verse 9. The national leadership has totally twisted and distorted justice by their attitudes

and actions. Now the people are confused about what is just and unjust. This language of accusation is incredibly strong language. These leaders really despise justice, he is saying, no matter what their public policy statements may say.

The second charge is that of violence in verse 10. The politicians are sacrificing lives to government building projects that are carried out too quickly. They are building the city of Jerusalem without concern for the cost of human life. Recent archeological discoveries in the city of Jerusalem reveal this problem, which occurred under King Hezekiah. If you've been to Jerusalem or the Holy Land, you may have walked through Hezekiah's water tunnel, which was dug by hand out of bedrock for over a mile, connecting the city with the Kidron Valley. On my last trip to Israel, we walked through the Jewish quarter on a newly discovered wall, called Hezekiah's Broad Wall, twenty-four feet wide. It was constructed during Micah's time. On that same trip, I went into some newly discovered underground storage caverns for grain and water which had been dug out of the rock under the city. These enormous construction projects required thousands of man-hours of hard physical labor, cutting and moving tons of rock. These leaders didn't worry too much about who got trampled in the process because they were intent on getting the job completed. As a result, many people died. Jeremiah the prophet, a hundred years later, complains of the same kind of social injustice under King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah says,

Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness
And his upper rooms without justice,
Who uses his neighbor's services without pay
And does not give him his wages,
Who says, "I will build myself a roomy house
With spacious upper rooms,
And cut out its windows,
Paneling it with cedar and painting it bright red."
Do you become a king because you are competing in cedar? (Jeremiah 22:13-15)

In addition to perversion and violence, the third charge is that of financial greed. The leaders, priests, and prophets are all motivated by personal gain. Judges are on the take, accepting bribes. That is in direct disobedience to God's law. They refuse to administer justice evenhandedly. The mention of priesthood has to do with their teaching ministry. They are to teach the Bible, teach the Law to the people, but they are charging steep tuition. What they really care about is making money off the Word of God. They are selling their biblical knowledge.

We have already seen how the prophets are in on the scam. The corruption is incredible, the duplicity unbelievable. They are covering it all up with a false religiosity. That's addressed in the last half of verse 11, where we see their arrogance: "Calamity will not come upon us" they say. Both the religious leaders and the political leaders are acting on the basis of false theology which says, "Isn't God here in our midst, in the middle of our government and our religious institutions? Isn't he in our worship at the temple?" This is total hypocrisy because on one hand, they reject God's justice, but on the other hand, they welcome his protection. The Bible is very clear, however, that God is not a protector of unjust people. All of the corrupt national leadership will suffer God's judgment.

Verse 12 summarizes that judgment: Everything they know and value will be wiped out. Jerusalem will be removed from the ancient Near Eastern map, and *they* are responsible. "On account of *you*," Micah says, "*you* leaders. The people are following *you* into devastation. The city will be destroyed. The temple will be destroyed." That is where their empty hope lay: "We've got this beautiful temple with great worship going on and we are fine!" So God is going to destroy the temple, because it was a symbol of empty religion.

The most terrifying reality here is the absence of God himself. If you look again at the three judgments, they intensify as you progress through the chapter. First, it is the silence of God, followed by absolute blackness. Finally, God himself is not there. He is absent from his temple and absent from among his people. That judgment comes because justice is ignored. But Micah, in contrast to the evil leadership, was a man who understood justice and was committed to justice.

Where is the hope?

This is a tough message. As I was wrestling with it, I was asking, “Where is the gospel in all of this? Where is hope?” This is one of the few sermons in the Bible where we can see the impact it had on history. There is actually a happy ending to the story. This sermon had an immediate impact on King Hezekiah of Judah. One hundred years later, the prophet Jeremiah adds this historical footnote, found in Jeremiah 26:16-19. In Isaiah 36-38, an elder of the nation at the time of the prophet Jeremiah remembers how Hezekiah and the national leadership heard this divine message. In response to Micah’s message in chapter 3, they feared the Lord, repented of their sin, and begged for his favor so that the disaster of his judgment would not fall on them. Because they turned to God, he did extend grace and decided not to destroy Judah at that time. The story demonstrates the amazing persuasive power of Micah’s message. God’s Spirit can use the word to pierce the hearts of people who are committed to injustice and break down that stubborn pride and resistance.

Hezekiah’s response, in fact, changed the course of history in Judah. This happened only because Micah was willing to declare “the rebellion of Jacob”—“the sins of Israel.” These three paragraphs, and our consideration in chapter 2, really emphasize that God is going to hold political, civil and religious leaders and their followers—us as well—accountable for their actions. The context changes, the responsibilities may change, the specific social problems may be different now than they were in the eighth century before Christ in Judah, but people in leadership roles still have a large influence on preserving justice for the community in which they serve.

I want to close with three points of application. First, try to answer the question: What do we have a right to expect from our civil leaders and governmental officials today? Second, what does God want to show me about my own heart and my own attitudes toward the poor, the helpless, and defenseless from my position of advantage and power and strength? Regardless of how limited we may feel our resources are, we are tremendously privileged compared to most of the world community. Finally, what do we have a right to expect from spiritual leadership in the church in light of this word from God?

Our responsibility of civil leadership

Let me talk first about civil leaders. By God’s design and blessing, we live in a participatory democracy. We have the right and responsibility to evaluate officials in all three branches of our government. Micah is concerned about this issue of justice and the far-reaching, tragic consequences of people who love evil and hate good. The issue really is one of character, the internal values that a leader draws on to act with integrity and fairness. We should expect our elected and appointed officials to serve selflessly, to stand firmly on the side of justice. The personal morality of our leaders does matter. We should support government leaders who call for independent councils to investigate unethical practices and governmental commissions that censure flagrant breaking of rules. If God himself condemns leaders who have a lifestyle of violence, oppression, selfishness or injustice toward other people, then so should we, his people. We should also support elected and appointed officials who try to guide our nation and communities in eliminating the injustices that plague our social, economic and political life. In the context of chapters 2 and 3 of Micah, we should be gripped with the broader issue of how God views the relationship between the rich and powerful, and the poor and powerless. We ought to be concerned about the broad role that government can play in regulating fair economic activity, caring for the poor,

protecting the rights of all people. These broad issues of justice are not some impersonal problem that some unnamed person of government ought to correct. These policies affect people's well-being and their quality of life. God cares about their quality of life, and so should we.

Our personal responsibility

Consider your own personal interaction with the helpless in our community. This is especially important for us as Christians if we are going to call ourselves people of God's word because the Bible repeatedly emphasizes that God sides with the poor, not the wealthy and powerful. In the story of the exodus, God fought against the Egyptians and delivered his people from oppression in Egypt. The prophet Amos, who prophesied in the north of Israel before the time of Micah, said that God was going to destroy the northern kingdom because his people "trample on the heads of the poor" (Amos 2:7 – NIV). In Isaiah 10:1-2, God promises to punish people who turn away the needy and rob the poor of what little they have. Proverbs 14:31 says, "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God." In Exodus 22:21-24, God expresses his deep concern for the disadvantaged, the weak, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger—in other words, people who can easily be taken advantage of and cheated. In the gospels, Jesus himself showed his concern for the poor. In Luke 14, he forces us to examine our own attitudes toward this issue. Jesus encourages us to invite not only our friends to dinner in order to share our material resources with people whom we enjoy, but to include the blind, the crippled, the poor, the helpless and the weak—people who could never return the favor.

One of our college students sent me an email this week, which I really appreciated. It was a very thoughtful attempt on his part to wrestle with some of these issues after listening to the message on Micah chapter 2 (Discovery Paper #4723). He wanted to play fair with the prophetic word as it touched him. I am grateful for his insight. First he talked about the fact that he thinks it is too easy for us to see the Israelites as much worse than we are, as "the bad people." He wrote: "I do think we exploit the poor in real concrete ways: the thankless way I consume clothing made in Southeast Asia or live in a house cleaned by the poor. I dehumanize the very people on whom I depend. We think like capitalists and we judge people as dollar signs intuitively, even when we don't realize it. Maybe we do worse too without realizing it because we are not faced with it. Well Micah faces us with it. The thrust of Micah chapter 2 is to expose the real plight of the poor and their concrete oppression by the advantaged." Again, each of us stands accountable before God in terms of how much we have benefited physically, materially and relationally. With great material blessing comes an even greater responsibility toward those who haven't been blessed in the same ways.

Responsibility of spiritual leadership

Finally, a word about what to expect from our spiritual leaders. I'm talking about the church. Pastors, elders and deacons who have failed to give godly leadership will cause people to wander off in confusion. The people of Judah followed their leaders into destruction. If we in leadership give preferential treatment to people who provide special financial benefit; if we disdain, ignore or mistreat people whom we decide have no real value for us or the ministry; if we twist the word of God in our teaching, counseling or preaching, then God will ultimately remove us from leadership. The privilege and responsibility of sharing what God has said, means that we speak *only* what God has said and that we speak *all* that God has said. That is what Paul referred to in Acts 20 as the "whole counsel of God." Micah understood that this task required him to share the truth consistently, even when it included negative news for close friends and good news for enemies. Personal character is an issue for us in spiritual leadership in the church.

A year and a half ago I re-read Jay Oswald Sanders' classic book entitled *Spiritual Leadership*. He lists

egotism and jealousy as the two main threats to Christian leadership. This is true in experience. Self-centeredness and envy in leaders eventually leads to injustice toward those who are weaker in the body of Christ. This will result in fractures, divisiveness and disunity in the body.

But, it doesn't have to be this way. There is a wonderful attractiveness in Micah's own self-assessment. Verse 8 is like a brilliant light shining in the murkiness of Judah's self-absorbed and self-serving leadership activity.

On the other hand [in wonderful contrast]
I am filled with power
With the Spirit of the Lord
And with justice and courage
To make known to Jacob his rebellious act,
Even to Israel his sin.

Authentic leadership which fearlessly tells the truth can only be exercised in the power of God. You can't do it on your own strength. Even contemporary secular books on leadership focus on this kind of authenticity. They use the vocabulary of constancy or congruity, reliability and integrity—words that describe the type of character that inspires confidence. How much more so for leadership that calls itself Christian! Listen again to Moses' commitment to godly leadership. We should have these same expectations of our leaders today because God still demands all leaders—civil, judicial, and religious—to be just, “able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain” (Exodus 18:21).

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