

IV. *Judean Justice*

25-Dec-05 Micah 3:1-12

Theme: God's people will reap what they sow: practicing injustice leads to separation from God, shame, and ultimate destruction.

Key Verse: Micah 3:8 ⁸But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the LORD, and of justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.

Review

Last week we looked at Micah chapter 2. In the first section (vv. 1-5), we were introduced to the *profiting profiteers* who practiced lawlessness upon the weak and defenseless, getting rich at the expense of others. Their *devious devisings* are countered by the counsel of God, who is *devising disaster* upon them for their sins. God's judgment is precise and it is commensurate with the crime. Just as they have forcibly taken what does not belong to them, God will tear away their possessions and give them to others, while exiling them from the land and excommunicating them forever.

In the second section (vv. 6-11), we met the *prattling prophets* who aided and abetted these robber barons. They opposed the whole counsel of God as preached by true prophets (such as Micah, Isaiah, and Hosea). Instead, they preached a "health, wealth, and prosperity gospel," choosing to focus on the goodness and love of God rather than balancing that message with a realistic portrait of God's holiness, righteousness, and justice. These false prophets contributed to a society in which anything goes, because "God really doesn't judge sin." Once again, Micah denounces the sins of the society and gives the wicked an eviction notice just like it was their practice to do upon their defenseless victims.

The tone of the third and final section (vv. 12-13) is completely different. Here we are introduced to the *regathered remnant*. The exile will definitely come, although it was delayed approximately 115 years. And yet, God promises to gather a faithful remnant to Himself through the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Two images are used to describe Christ's activities: 1) He is a Shepherd, taking care of His flock; and 2) He is a King, leading a victory procession. All those who trust in Christ for salvation can take comfort in being part of His remnant. Regardless of the storms of this life, Christ will always be there to shepherd us and to rule over us.

Micah chapter 2 offers hope for a sinful people. Regardless of our sin, we can repent and return to God. This is good news for a *prodigal people*. Let us repent and return to Him.

Introduction

In today's lesson, Micah continues to make his case against the people of Judah. In Micah 1, God is sitting in judgment in His temple, and then comes down to execute justice. In Micah 2, the sins of the businessmen are particularly highlighted, along with the false prophets who aid them. In Micah 3, our prophet brings the case against the civil leaders, re-emphasizing the guilt of the false prophets. Overall, he paints a grim and horrifying picture of the type of *Judean justice* one could expect to receive at the hands of these indicted groups.

Micah's message falls into three parts or stanzas of four verses each. In each part, there is an indictment followed by a sentence. The first stanza condemns the judges of the nation as *corrupt cannibals* (vv. 1-4). The second stanza returns to the *peace prophets* (vv. 5-8) and exposes their

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powerless message, contrasted with the powerful message of the true prophet Micah. The final stanza revisits the *lousy leaders* of the nation (vv. 9-12). All three stanzas are tied together by the key word of “justice.” It is a lack of justice that Micah condemns.

Since Micah 3:12 is quoted in Jeremiah 26:18 and attributed to the days of Hezekiah, it is likely that this entire message was given by Micah early in the days of Hezekiah and could have led to that king’s reforms of the nation.

Exposition

A. Corrupt Cannibals (3:1-4)

1. Ravenous Rulers (3:1-3)

Micah starts out his message by addressing the **heads of Jacob** and **the rulers of the house of Israel** (v. 1a). His audience is those who are in authority. The Bible consistently teaches “for everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required” (Lk. 12:48). It is no different for the leaders of Judah.

Micah introduces the theme of this chapter in the form of a rhetorical question: **Is it not for you to know justice?** (v. 1b). Of course, the answer is “yes!” The leaders of the people are also judges who are empowered to administer justice. From ancient times, the elders of a city would meet at the city gate to judge cases. Listen to the Law of Moses:

¹⁸*You shall appoint judges and officers in all your gates, which the LORD your God gives you, according to your tribes, and they shall judge the people with just judgment.*

¹⁹You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show partiality, nor take a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous. ²⁰You shall follow what is altogether just, that you may live and inherit the land which the LORD your God is giving you (Dt. 16:18-20).

What is **justice**? In one sense, it has to do with enforcing the law. The court is tasked with protecting the innocent and punishing the guilty according to the standards of the law. In order for the justice of the law to be upheld, the judges would not only have to be familiar with the law, but they also would be required to embrace it and agree with it. In Old Testament Israel, the law was supremely the Law of God revealed in the Pentateuch. For a judge to do his job properly, he would have to be a student of the Word of God.

In the word “justice” there is also another sense of meaning that has to do with protecting the less fortunate. Just as in today’s society, the rich and powerful of Micah’s day had ample opportunity to buy and sell “justice” for their own benefit. True justice does not show favoritism towards the powerful, the wealthy, or the famous. It is a fair application of God’s principles across the spectrum of those who seek the truth.

So, how do the rulers of Judah do? They **hate good and love evil** (v. 2a). They have it all backwards. Instead of promoting justice, they are perverting justice. They did not protect the innocent and punish the guilty; they did exactly the opposite! They are rewarding the robber barons and punishing their victims. They support those who *devise disaster*. They twist justice and turn it on its head. They rejected what was good and right and true in favor of what was wicked and evil and sinful.

In this assessment, Micah is not alone. His contemporary, Isaiah, says exactly the same thing of the people of Judah:

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¹⁶Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. *Cease to do evil, ¹⁷learn to do good; seek justice*, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow (Is. 1:16-17).

In this message, both Micah and Isaiah are echoing their earlier colleague Amos. Amos had preached the same message to the previous generation in the northern kingdom of Israel:

¹⁴Seek good and not evil, that you may live; so the LORD God of hosts will be with you, as you have spoken. ¹⁵*Hate evil, love good; establish justice in the gate*. It may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph (Amos 5:14-15).

Micah's audience has the example of Israel right in front of them. They also hated good, loved evil, and perverted justice. And what happened? The Assyrians came and destroyed their civilization.

Micah then proceeds to use a truly amazing metaphor to describe the depths of depravity of these unjust judges. He describes them as *ravenous rulers* that feed upon the people of God:

²... who strip the skin from My people, and the flesh from their bones; ³who also eat the flesh of My people, flay their skin from them, break their bones, and chop them in pieces like meat for the pot, like flesh in the caldron (Mic. 3:2b-3).

Perverting justice is all in a day's work, like making a nice pot of stew. But not just any pot of stew. The judges of God's people have become *corrupt cannibals*. Boice puts it this way:

They are feeding on those it is their responsibility to defend. The charge is far worse than those in chapter 2. Here it is not merely a matter of taking away possessions—clothes or home or inheritance; the judges were attacking the people themselves. They were feeding upon the lifeblood and sinews of the nation.

How evil does a society have to be to be described in this way? How awful is the perversion of justice to have it compared to cannibalism? How wicked does a culture have to get in order to be characterized in this way?

2. Divine Deafness (3:4)

After describing the injustice of Judah's leaders, God then pronounces the sentence:

⁴Then they will cry to the LORD, but He will not hear them; He will even hide His face from them at that time, because they have been evil in their deeds (Mic. 3:4).

This is another example of *lex talionis*, of poetic justice. God, the Supreme Justice, will turn a deaf ear to those who refused to listen to the pleas of the innocent, the less fortunate, and the helpless. Allen points out that "the term *cry out* is a technical one for appeal to a judge for help against victimization." Undoubtedly, many had cried out to these judges for justice, but what kind of justice did they find in the stew pot? After turning a deaf ear to the cries of helpless, they would be confronted in turn with *divine "deafness"*.

Even more frightening than the prospect of God not listening to their pleas is the description of God hiding His face from them. For God to hide His face is equivalent to removing His blessing from upon them. God's face shining upon His people is the central aspect of the Aaronic Blessing:

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²⁴The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵*The LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you;* ²⁶The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace (Num. 6:24-26).

Conversely, when God's face is hidden from His people, it is a sign of judgment:

⁹*Do not hide Your face from me;* do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; do not leave me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation (Ps. 27:9).

Why does God turn His back and a deaf ear on these *corrupt cannibals*? Because **they have been evil in their deeds** (v. 4b). Prior comments:

The phrase speaks of a deliberate, progressive, insistent, defiant series of decisions over many years, which have resulted in a corrupt and callous lifestyle. What Micah describes is not simply a slippery slope and a slide into evil. These leaders have made their deeds evil, by choice and with consistency. Nor is he talking about frequent acts of injustice, so much as injustice as a way of life. *They have made their deeds evil.* There was no way back.

The process of becoming a *corrupt cannibal* doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. But the process can be reversed, through the grace of God. The sentence God gives here is for those who do not repent of their sin. For the unrepentant, there is no hope – God's silence and separation will be deadly. But for those who repent there is hope. Remember, God could have destroyed this society in 701 BC through Sennacherib, but He did not. Jerusalem was spared. Why? Because Micah's message was heard, and there was a measure of repentance that delayed the judgment for more than a century.

B. Peace Prophets (3:5-8)

1. Powerless Prophets (3:5)

Micah next directs his attention once again to the *peace prophets* who preach a false message. He has already dealt with this group once in 2:5-11, but he has more to say here.

First, notice that these prophets **make My people stray** (v. 5a). Right away, Micah characterizes them as false prophets with a false message. The people of God are supposed to test the messages of the prophets against the revealed will of God in His Word. If what these individuals say contradicts what God has revealed, then they are false prophets. The people of God had been warned against this very circumstance:

¹If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams, and he gives you a sign or a wonder, ²and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, 'Let us go after other gods'—which you have not known—'and let us serve them,' ³you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams, for the LORD your God is testing you to know whether you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴You shall walk after the LORD your God and fear Him, and keep His commandments and obey His voice; you shall serve Him and hold fast to Him (Dt. 13:1-4).

This is why it is so important that each of us is consistently in the Word of God, reading it ourselves, meditating on it ourselves, studying it ourselves. If we do not know the Word of God, then we will not be able to discern truth from falsehood in the teaching of others. This is why many are led astray today by preachers of a partial gospel that emphasizes health, wealth, and prosperity but doesn't mention sin and its consequences. Do not be led astray.

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Second, notice what their message is: **peace** (v. 5b). They have a good message, a welcome message, an encouraging message. Unfortunately, it is not a complete message. Once again, we see how the false prophets emphasize the positive aspects of the gospel but fail to warn their listeners of the consequences of sin. These *powerless prophets* may make their listeners feel good in the short term, but ultimately, the wrath of God will fall upon them because they have an incomplete gospel.

Third, notice the audience of their message. The false prophets preach peace to those who provide food **they chew with their teeth** (v. 5b). Here, Micah is condemning the *peace prophets* because they are mercenaries. They are in it for the *quid pro quo*. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. You pay me a lot of money and provide for my physical needs and desires, and I'll give you a good message and a positive future.

These prophets weren't in it for the ministry; they were in it for the money. Notice their attitude towards those who couldn't afford their steep hourly rates: they **prepare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths** (v. 5b). The false prophets cared nothing for others; they only were concerned about themselves. Allen puts it this way:

Selfish expediency had become their criterion for the content of their oracles, on the principle that he who pays the piper calls the tune. Eventually they were in the prophecy business for what they could get out of it. Corrupted by cupidity, they turned into religious charlatans, dressing with the right prophetic trimmings their bogus oracles.

2. Divine Darkness (3:6-7)

Once again following the principle of "you reap what you sow," Micah pronounces judgment upon the *peace prophets*:

⁶Therefore you shall have night without vision, and you shall have darkness without divination; the sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be dark for them. ⁷So the seers shall be ashamed, and the diviners abashed; indeed they shall all cover their lips; For there is no answer from God (Mic. 3:6-7).

Surprisingly, Micah seems to attribute a true prophetic gift to his adversaries. The judgment that falls upon them is a removal of this prophetic gift. Their ability to have prophetic visions and dreams will be taken away from them. A *divine darkness* will descend as God cuts off His gift from those that have abused it. Although they will seek the Lord, **there is no answer from God** (v. 7b).

The judgment here in Micah is especially tragic as we consider how these gifted men had abused their God-given talents for their own selfish desires. How great they could have been in God's kingdom! They could have been Hoseas and Micahs and Isaiahs, but instead they selfishly sought their own comfort first instead of the kingdom of God. Instead of the glory associated with doing God's will, their lasting legacy will be embarrassment and shame.

Their shame is symbolized by the phrase **they shall all cover their lips** (v. 7b). On one level, this is referring to the shame of the messages that had been forthcoming from their mouths. But on another level, it pictured uncleanness, isolation, rejection, and separation. It pointed to the leper, who was an outcast from the people of God:

⁴⁵Now the leper on whom the sore is, his clothes shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his mustache, and cry, 'Unclean! Unclean!' (Lev. 13:45).

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3. Powerful Prophet (3:8)

To illustrate what these *peace prophets* had given up by turning their God-given gift towards selfish desires, Micah describes what a *powerful prophet* – himself – looks like:

⁸But truly I am full of power by the Spirit of the LORD, and of justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin (Mic. 3:8).

Micah is the complete antithesis of the *powerless prophets*. He describes three ways in which his ministry is superior. First, he describes the source of His **power**: the Holy Spirit. Micah's ministry was powerful because it was led by and infused by the Spirit of God. Micah went where God led and did what God commanded. He wasn't in the prophet ministry to turn a profit. He wasn't in it for his own comfort and ease. His success was because he relied on the power of God.

The second key to Micah's success is his focus on **justice**. Once again this key word comes up in Micah chapter 3. The false prophets were not interested in justice – they could be bribed to provide a favorable message to those who could afford their fees. Their messages were influenced by their audience. Micah's message is influenced solely by God. Allen comments: "Micah asserts that his message is based on a true sense of right. He gets no material advantage out of preaching as he does. His sole motive is to encourage right and discourage wrong."

Finally, notice the content of Micah's *message*. Micah is not afraid to proclaim the whole counsel of God. As we have already seen, the majority of Micah's message has to do with **transgression** and **sin**, not "peace and prosperity." While this would not be a popular message, Micah remained true to his calling as a prophet of God. Prior summarizes this well:

As a result of allowing his life to be directed by God's Spirit towards justice, Micah found himself addressing the corruption and wickedness in the nation, especially in the corridors of power. He will not get fat fees and special rewards for being obedient to God, but he will continue to live in the light of God's favor and to hear God's voice. Such a blessing is a gift beyond any material reward and is worth maintaining at any cost.

Micah could have succumbed to temptation and joined his faithless brethren who lined their pockets with ill-gotten gain. But he chose to stand for justice and truth in the power of the Spirit. Let us also stand with Micah and his band of brothers who remained faithful to the Word of God. As Martin Luther said, "Here I stand, I can do no other."

C. Lousy Leaders (3:9-12)

1. Sowing Sin (3:9-11)

Micah once again returns to a condemnation of Judah's *lousy leaders*. In verses 1-4, Micah concentrated on the corruption of justice in the courts. Here in verses 9-12, Micah widens his focus. Although he starts out in verse 9 with a similar address to the **heads of the house of Jacob** and to the **rulers of the house of Israel**, Micah shows us in verse 11 that he is talking about more than just unjust judges. **Priests** and **prophets** are also included in this judgment.

Micah has just described how his role as a *powerful prophet* of God includes the declaration of the sin of God's people. He now proceeds to do just that. Once again, Micah returns to the theme of this entire chapter by declaring that the *lousy leaders* are characterized by their abhorrence of **justice** and their perversion of **all equity** (v. 9b). They demonstrate how far away

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they are from God in their rejection of one of God's chief attributes. Saying that they **abhor justice** is just another way to say that they hate God and all that He stands for.

Another characteristic of these *lousy leaders* is the way in which they accomplish their goals. They were interested in increasing the earthly glory of Jerusalem by embarking upon an ambitious building program. However, they have shown no concern for the manner with which their city is built up. Micah condemns them for building **with bloodshed** and **with iniquity** (v. 10a). Jerusalem was supposed to be the holy city, the city where God's glory dwelt. Instead, it was becoming a monument to the greed and sin of its earthly inhabitants.

Micah is more concerned about motives and methods than results. There is nothing necessarily wrong about construction. It is the reason for building and the method in building that is important. The men on the plains of Shinar sought to build a tower to take heaven by storm. God frustrated the builders of the Tower of Babel because of their sinful motives. In contrast, God blessed the construction of the Temple by Solomon and inhabited that building with His own glory.

This is a warning for all of us. We may have the desire to build up God's kingdom, but we need to be careful of our motives and methods. Are we seeking to get praise from men rather than God? Are we desiring power or position rather than service and submission? Do we want to be noticed and rewarded? Do we step on others to accomplish our goals? Do we alienate our fellow church members in order to get our own way? If so, we would be wise to remember God's principle:

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain (Ps. 127:1).

Micah is just getting warmed up. He seems intent in verse 11 on describing how these *lousy leaders* have been intent on *sowing sin* in preparation for telling us what they will be reaping. If you had a legal problem, you could take it to a **judge** and get it resolved for a **bribe**. If you had a religious problem, you could go to a **priest** and get the answer you wanted **for pay**. If you had a personal problem that required some kind of knowledge of the future, a **prophet** could "tell your fortune" **for money**.

Once again, Micah condemns the widespread corruption at all levels in his society. Obviously, *Judean justice* was simply a matter of how much money you had. While it is right and proper to pay those in authority for the services they render (*cp.* Lk. 10:7), what Micah describes goes far beyond that. These officials have been corrupted by their love of money, a "root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10).

The most amazing thing about the corruption of these officials is that they still on the outside appear to be orthodox. As Prior puts it, "They simply could not see any discrepancy between their acts of worship and their acts of wickedness." Micah says, **Yet they lean on the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD among us? No harm can come upon us"** (Mic. 3:11b).

Despite their evil natures and desires, they still **lean on the LORD**. What does this mean? It seems that they tried to justify their sin with the assurance that God would never do anything about it. After all, the Temple of God stood in their midst as a symbol of God's love and protection, of His presence in the midst of His people. Surely nothing could or would happen to them because God's Temple was in Jerusalem.

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This is a familiar theme in the Scripture. One hundred years later, the prophet Jeremiah decries this very attitude of security in the midst of sin:

¹The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ²“Stand in the gate of the LORD’s house, and proclaim there this word, and say, ‘Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD!’” ³Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: “Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. ⁴Do not trust in these lying words, saying, ‘The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these.’” ⁵“For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, ⁶if 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, ⁷then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. ⁸“Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. ⁹Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, ¹⁰and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, ‘We are delivered to do all these abominations’? ¹¹Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” says the LORD (Jer. 7:1-10).

The people of Jeremiah’s day and the people of Micah’s day had the same problem: they worshiped the Temple of the God rather than the God of the Temple. They had made the Temple a superstitious good-luck charm that would protect them from all harm. Don’t be fooled into thinking that we aren’t tempted to fall into the same trap. Do you rely on your baptism to get you to heaven? On your church attendance? On your family’s religious credentials? These things cannot and will not save you. Don’t try to justify your own sinfulness with these external things. The root of our sin problem is inside of us, and it is only God who can fix it.

2. Reaping Rubble (3:12)

Sowing sin leads to *reaping rubble*. Because of their sin – **because of you** – all of the things that these *lousy leaders* cherished would be reduced to rubble. Their ambitious building program described in verse 10 would become **heaps of ruins** (v. 12). The Temple – their good luck charm that protected them from harm – would be destroyed as the temple mount was wiped clean and **bare**.

Although Micah’s prophecy may have seemed unthinkable to the people of Jerusalem, all they would have to do is look a few miles to the north and consider Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel. Micah had prophesied in 1:7 that Samaria would be **a heap of ruins** just as he foretold that Jerusalem would become **heaps of ruins**. The former had occurred. The latter was sure.

Conclusion

Micah’s message had a lasting impact. We know that there was a revival in his day, during the reign of King Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 18:4-6). As Bentley points out, “Micah’s efforts probably played a large part in the revival of true religion.”

Micah’s words were remembered 100 years later, when another prophet – Jeremiah – felt the wrath of another *lousy leader* – King Jehoiakim. Jeremiah was put on trial for preaching the true word of God that upset the king. The same groups of people that Micah condemns here – the

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priests, the prophets, and the rulers – were seeking to execute Jeremiah for speaking the truth. However, some elders of the land who had not been corrupted reminded the court of Micah's ministry:

¹⁷Then certain of the elders of the land rose up and spoke to all the assembly of the people, saying: ¹⁸“Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah, and spoke to all the people of Judah, saying, ‘*Thus says the LORD of hosts: “Zion shall be plowed like a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins, and the mountain of the temple like the bare hills of the forest.”*’” ¹⁹Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah ever put him to death? Did he not fear the LORD and seek the LORD's favor? And the LORD relented concerning the doom which He had pronounced against them. But we are doing great evil against ourselves” (Jer. 26:17-19).

Because of this testimony, Jeremiah's life was spared. However, the city of Jerusalem was not. Within a few years of Jeremiah's trial, Micah's prophecy came to pass. Jerusalem was reduced to rubble and the temple was destroyed. The Psalmist puts it this way:

¹O God, the nations have come into Your inheritance; Your holy temple they have defiled; they have laid Jerusalem *in heaps* (Ps. 79:1).

God delayed judgment on Nineveh for 150 years after the ministry of Jonah because they repented. God delayed judgment on Jerusalem for 115 years after the ministry of Micah because they repented. But ultimately, both Nineveh and Jerusalem were destroyed. We need to be constantly on guard to purify ourselves, repent from evil, and seek true justice so that we do not fall away into sin and apostasy and destruction. Allen sums it up well:

Micah's words, remembered for their shocking severity a hundred years later, deserve to be taken to heart by each generation of God's people. They challenge every attempt to misuse the service of God for one's own glory and profit. They are a dire warning against the complacency that can take God's love and reject His lordship. They are a passionate plea for consistency between creed and conduct. The Lord is content with nothing less.

Next week: Lesson 5 – Global Glory – Micah 4:1-5:1

Close in Prayer.