

Sermon 5, The Prophet's Warnings, Micah 3

Proposition: The judgment of God lands ferociously on the elites who harm His people.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the book of Micah is known to us for two, and only two, of its many beautiful and glorious statements. You know both of these statements: "But you, Bethlemen, too little be among the thousands of Judah . . ." You know that one. And this one: "He has shown 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 thy God?” Virtually all American Christians know those two statements. A girl I went to church with growing up actually has “Micah 6:8” tattooed on the back of her neck in Old English font (and it’s hideous). But Micah is not a book of quotes for Hobby Lobby wall decor. In addition to these well-known statements about the coming Messiah and about the way to live the Christian life, most of the book is actually about judgment on God’s people, and about the way through judgment to new life on the far side. That’s why we’re looking at the third chapter of this magnificent book together this morning. Here we see, in graphic detail, the description of the sins of God’s people and the judgments that will follow those sins. Brothers and sisters, what we need to learn is that the sins of those responsible for ruling and teaching God’s people — which would be all of us, in our different capacities as fathers, mothers, teachers, older siblings, and fellow church members — are extremely serious, and that God will hold us to account for them. When He does, His judgments will revolve around the theme of His absence from us. In short, God will ferociously judge those who harm His people, and He will judge them by removing His presence from them.

I. Judgment on Rulers, vv. 1-4

Micah ministered for 40 years. In those decades, he surely did far more preaching than what is recorded in this book, which takes less than half an hour to read aloud in its entirety. This, brothers and sisters, is the ‘greatest hits’ reel of Micah of Moresheth. Here we have his very best messages written down for us. And he reminds us that he orally delivered these things. He didn’t just denounce wicked officials from the comfort of an undisclosed location. He stood up in front of the people who were doing this and he called them out to their faces.

When you think of it that way, suddenly you agree with what he says later: that he was filled with the Spirit of God and courage to denounce Jacob and Israel’s sins. Oh that we would have that same Spirit to admit our own sins and to speak forthrightly against the sins of those right in front of us!

A. Their calling: To know justice, v. 1c

So Micah begins by addressing the rulers. Those with some political authority are the target of his message. He starts by reminding them of their duty. They were supposed to know justice. Now, as everywhere in the Bible, this “knowledge” is not abstract but practical. To know justice is to practice justice. It is to use one’s office as a holder of political power in order to administer to each person what is due to him. In that light, to know justice means to be just, to do justice. That was the calling of Israel’s rulers then and it is the calling of all government officials today. The state is supremely concerned with administering justice, as the church is concerned with worshipping God and the family is concerned with loving and nurturing the individual. So those who exercise authority in the state need to know justice and do justice.

B. Their sins, vv. 2-3

But what is it that the rulers of Micah’s day (around 720 BC) actually did? Well, he spells it out in some loaded terms.

1. Hating good, loving evil, v. 2a

Their attitude had nothing to do with justice. In fact, it was an inversion of justice. Rather than loving what is good and hating what is evil, they did precisely the opposite — hating what is good and loving what is evil. If it was sick, they liked it. If it was loathsome, they were attracted to it. Beauty didn't move them; ugliness and horror did.

Now, what does that look like concretely? It looks like sexual perversion, where your wife doesn't turn you on but a little boy does. It looks like economic perversion, where you do nothing and live like a king while the poor person who works 75 hours a week is struggling to pay rent and has never had health insurance or paid time off. It looks like social perversion, where you have people who love you and respect you but you do your part to ensure that others have no one to love or respect them. It looks like choosing to watch Joe Exotic instead of listening to God's word, picking *Westworld* over an evening playing board games with your family, watching *Game of Thrones* instead of writing letters to your friends in other states, surfing for porn instead of buying a gift for your wife. Brothers and sisters, to love evil is to do evil. It means, out of all your options, picking the evil one instead of the good one. That's what the rulers of God's people were doing at this time in history. And of course, the attitude that's in the leaders is also in the people. If their rulers were doing this, what do you think the ordinary Israelites were doing?

2. Butchering God's people, vv. 2b-3

But as if it were not enough to highlight their wretched attitude, God also indicts these rulers for butchering God's people. With graphic language, He describes how the leaders cut up not "their" people but "my" people. God goes out of his way to describe the victims as "my people." They don't belong to their human rulers; they belong to Yahweh. They are His people and the sheep of His pasture. God looks at the victims and owns them. He acknowledges them as His.

So what exactly are these rulers doing? Obviously we have to acknowledge that this language is metaphorical. They had not actually descended to the place where they fattened human beings and lived on their flesh as a bunch of cannibal kings. But metaphorically, that's exactly what the heads of Judah were doing. They were butchering God's people. Surely this refers to all kinds of economic and physical oppression, everything from disrespecting and robbing of dignity all the way to actually murdering and profiteering off the corpses of their victims. A bigger question is, how can you and I be guilty of this sin? The answer is that we do this whenever we burden God's people, whenever we take what's rightfully theirs, whenever we make their life miserable through undeserved meanness. Dads, when you yell at your kids you're butchering their self-image. Moms, when you spend hours explaining to your kids how much they hurt you and how sorry they ought to be, you're ripping to shreds their ability to believe that God is loving and kind. Pastors, when you care more about the offerings than about the people in the pews, you are guilty of this.

C. Their punishment: God will hide from them, v. 4

And what does God do to those who treat His people this way? He doesn't answer. He hides His face from them. When they want to hear from Him, He looks away and ignores what they said. They have chosen evil deeds and so they have chosen to have God ignore them.

How is this a punishment? We were made for communion with God. His silence, His ignoring of us, is one of the most severe punishments He can inflict because it deprives us of what we were made for. We were made for Him, and without Him we shrivel. Similarly, today, if you choose to spend your time on porn or raunchy television then you will not be in touch with God. You will cry out to Him in desperation, and He will not answer.

II. Judgment on Prophets, vv. 5-8

Well, it is not just political rulers who come in for a drubbing. The second group Micah denounces is the prophets. These are people who told forth the word of God. Rather than holding state power, they held ecclesiastical power. The closest comparison in the modern church is to the office of senior pastor — that guy up front who is the main attraction and does most of the talking.

A. Their sins

And what were these prophets doing?

1. Leading God's people astray, v. 5b

God summarizes it as leading His people astray. Prophets speak the word of God. They are supposed to lead people to God so they can build their relationship with Him. But these prophets were not speaking God's true word and leading His people to know Him.

How do we do this? In all kinds of ways. The most obvious is failing to lead our families in family worship, failing to teach our children the basics of the faith, failing to pray with and for them. If you don't have children, you can lead your employees and friends astray by encouraging them in their ungodly opinions. If they say something false about the Bible or God, you can agree, or stay silent, or signal that it's no big deal.

2. Favoring those who feed them, vv. 5c-d

What else did these prophets do? They prostituted their power to bring messages from God in order to give favorable messages to those who gave them food. Meanwhile, they attacked and declared war on anyone who didn't give to their organization. The worst excesses of the televangelists come to mind at this point. Brothers and sisters, the prophets were transparently money-grubbing, just as many evangelists and prosperity gospel preachers are today, just as the Roman Catholic Church was in the sixteenth century, and so it goes.

Thank God that we're not! Or, wait: Are we? Do you talk about money? Think about money? Of course you do. But how often? Do you check your bank account every day? Do you think every week or every month about what you could do with a raise? Do you tell your kids "No, we can't afford that" all the time? Do you feel regularly as though you're deprived and wish you had more money to do more in life? Brothers and sisters, you and I can be money-driven. It's a little harder for those not in professional ministry to be money-driven in

administering God's word. But I think we can find ways. You could literally offer to do family worship only if your church paid you to do it, for instance. You probably would never dream of asking for such a thing. But if you would be more likely to do family worship if you got paid \$35 every time you read a chapter of the Bible to your kids, then you are more driven by money than by the desire to teach God's word to those under your charge. If you would be more likely to spend time in prayer every day if your boss gave you a paid "prayer break," then again, you are driven by money more than by desire to speak to God.

Brothers and sisters, in saying these things I condemn myself. I know I would be eager to cash in on family worship and private prayer time. But if that's the case, then what do I need to do? Just shrug and say "This is the way I am. I guess if God wants me to get more spiritually advanced, then I guess He better start paying me"? Obviously, we know that that attitude means that we will never grow spiritually. Instead, we must repudiate our obsessive pursuit of wealth. Yes, we need to work to eat. But we absolutely must not live for greenbacks!

B. Their punishment: God will not answer them, vv. 6-7

Because if you do, what will happen? God will not answer you. These verses are astonishing because they seem to suggest that God was giving visions to the false prophets. Was He giving them false visions? Was He merely giving them the hyperactive imagination that they then used to generate their own "visions"? We don't know. The point is that however these prophets got their prophetic messages, God was going to jam that source. He was going to impose a vision blackout. He was going to blind the spiritual eyes of the seers so that they would have nothing to report and predict — ever. He was going to smash the crystal ball of these diviners.

Now, what would this look like in our lives? The Bible would stop making sense. Sermons would sound like the worst of C-Span. Bible studies would be excruciating experiences, rather like the feeling most of us would experience at a trade show for plastic beads or a sewer-and-water department conference. The external practices of Christianity would fall by the wayside as they became unendurable to us.

C. Their calling, v. 8

But if you have a responsibility to share God's word with anyone, then you have elements of the calling that these prophets had.

1. To be like Micah, the true prophet

Micah presents himself here as the alternative to the dangerous and destructive habits of the false prophets. He is the positive example of what anyone who declares God's word ought to be. There is one qualification for that job, and one supremely important task that the job cannot be done without.

2. To be filled with Yahweh's Spirit

The single qualification to be a prophet is to be filled with the Holy Spirit. You cannot speak God's word in any convincing or authoritative way unless you are equipped with God's Spirit. The Holy Spirit always accompanies the Word. He was with Jesus in His earthly life. He

superintended the writing of the Bible. And He is the one who continues to use and apply the word in the lives of God's people today.

a) The Spirit gives power

In particular, the Spirit gives these three things (and they parallel the description of Messiah as the Spirit-filled one in Isaiah 11 and other places). The first one is power. With the Spirit, there is power. Without Him there is weakness. The Spirit is God Almighty, and He is omnipotent. He can do anything; with Him all things are possible. To have Him with you is to have all the power you need to do all that God has commanded you to do. Micah had to minister for 40 years to people like the ones described in this chapter. How did he do it? He did it by being filled with the Spirit of Power.

b) The Spirit gives judgment

But the Spirit also gave him judgment. What does this mean? It means the ability to decide tough cases and disputes. That was a gift from the Holy Spirit. Micah was not born with exceptionally good judgment; it was a supernatural gift conferred on him by God's Spirit. Do you want to have good judgment, including the ability to know whether something is right or wrong, of God or of the Devil? Then you need the Spirit. You can't rebuke sin without the good judgment to know what it is and where it is and how it is manifesting itself in front of you. The Spirit is the one who gives you that judgment.

c) The Spirit gives might

And finally, the Spirit gives might. The spiritual strength to stand for the truth against all odds and all comers is not a natural gift for fallen human beings. It is a spiritual gift — that is, something the Holy Spirit alone can confer.

So how did Micah do it? The answer is simple. He had the Holy Spirit.

3. To call out sin among their audience

And with the Holy Spirit present in His life, He was able to call out the sins present in His audience there in elite circles in Jerusalem. Brothers and sisters, many preachers make a career out of denouncing the sins of "those people" out there. If we denounce the homosexuals, well, you won't find any in this church. Meanwhile, we never mention any sins that are actually being sinned by the people in front of us. That wouldn't play so well. Thus, a progressive church can denounce the sins of Donald Trump, and a conservative church can denounce the sins of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and each can feel pretty good about itself. Brothers and sisters, do you know what? That's garbage. That doesn't take any guts. That only takes an ability to see which way the wind is blowing such that you repeat what you know will play well to the people around you. But Micah was filled with the Spirit to denounce the sins of his actual audience. The people in front of him were getting the business end of his words. That takes guts, whether you're a prophet or a parent or a boss or a friend. How comfortable would you be rebuking someone? Part of it is personality, of course. But at the end of the day, a genuine rebuke of sin is not about personality but about spirituality. If you have the Holy Spirit, you have the judgment and courage and strength to say "Hey, the Bible says that you shouldn't be doing that." "You

shouldn't be yelling at your kids. You shouldn't be hitting your wife. You shouldn't be surfing porn sites. You shouldn't be making out with your girlfriend. You shouldn't be neglecting to give to the poor for years at a stretch."

Brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin. And He often does it through His word in the mouth of a human being. Are you open to hearing that word? Are you open to speaking it?

III. Judgment on Elites, vv. 9-12

Well, Micah delivers a third broadside, this one against leaders in both the secular and religious realms. Against the Jerusalem establishment in general, he denounces five different sins and then outlines the most destructive punishment that could be mentioned to a Jerusalemite of that era.

A. Their Sins, vv. 9-11

What were these elites doing?

1. Abhorring justice, v. 9b

They were abhorring justice. They would rather do anything than punish the guilty and acquit the innocent. Like the activists today who will do anything to defend abortion and in the same breath decry the carceral state, these people had no concept of the difference between "guilty" and "innocent." They wanted to kill the innocent but would have a fit if anyone wanted to execute the guilty. How do we do this? Well, we abhor justice when it comes to us. I don't want to get slapped with a fine even though I had gone more than 5 mph over the speed limit on numerous occasions. I don't want to be blacklisted as a minister of the gospel, even though I have watched pornographic scenes many times since being ordained (and repented afterward and told my wife and my brother!). I don't want to be punished for my sins, and neither do you. We might like justice for everyone else, but rare indeed is the person who endorses it for himself, who is willing to serve as prosecutor in his own case.

2. Twisting the straight, v. 9c

And so, in order to protect their nice fat bureaucratic hiniies, these elites twisted everything straight. Whether that was endorsing the LGBTQP+ agenda, or trying to stop right worship in the temple, or generally keeping a tight rein on everything that happened around Jerusalem so they could be sure they got the credit for it, they twisted all that was straight.

3. Building the church with bloodshed, v. 10

How might we be guilty of this? It sounds terrible. One thinks of construction projects that are careless of worker's lives, or that employ slaves who drop like flies but are mercilessly driven anyway. I don't know of any pastors, even of the prosperity gospel variety, who literally kill people in order to build their churches. So we're off the hook, right? This is a sin that they sinned back in the day, but it's not one that we sin any more. We don't do violent injustice.

I think one way we could do this is by supporting and encouraging abusive people, whether that's angry husbands, lustful fathers, or crooked cops. The parallel to "bloodshed" here in this verse is "violent injustice" in the NASB or "wickedness" in the NIV. Obviously bloodshed and violence is one kind of wickedness.. But refusing to discipline people in the church who are

hurting their families by their wickedness, violent or not, because these people are good givers or otherwise encouraging members is certainly one way to build the church with bloodshed.

Another is to press for volunteers and make people volunteer long after they're dried up. More meetings! More church events! More time away from family! Brothers and sisters, shepherds lead. Cowboys drive. There's a difference. If your church is a "cowboy church," it will always be pushing you to do more. Some cowboy churches push the members. Others push the pastor. Some cowboy churches push everybody. And it's all done in the name of building the church. Our friends here at the Seventh-Day Adventist church have a little offering envelope in the back of the seat in front of you. If you'll open up that offering envelope, you'll see that it has a scale built in that recommends that the hardworking members of our sister church give 20% of their income to the church. In my book, that can easily become "cowboy church" that pushes people where Jesus, the one whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light, does not push them. I have friends in ministry whose church makes them feel guilty for working less than sixty hours a week. That's a cowboy church. They are all about pushing their pastor for more! I'm not here to push you for more. I am a shepherd (in English) or a pastor (in Latin). The two words mean the same thing. My job is to make sure you get enough spiritual food (Jesus is that food), enough water (the water of the word), and that predators don't pick you off. Where does "push them to go places and do things" appear in that job description? It doesn't. Brothers and sisters, if our church is about pushing, it's building Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Our church is supposed to be a place of rest, a place where we meet for love and encourage each other gratuitously.

4. Working exclusively for money, v. 11a

And that point about the gratuitous nature of what we do here in the church is reinforced by the next verse. Judah in Micah's day was loaded with officials who were just there to collect a paycheck, not to work. They wouldn't give a verdict without a bribe. They wouldn't preach or serve the Lord's Supper without a bribe. They wouldn't give a prophetic word without a bribe.

How is this seen among us today? Well, the most obvious way is when we don't call each other, don't invite each other over, don't participate in ministry because it's the job of the professionals. "That's what we pay the pastor for!" If that's your attitude, then you are one of these who won't do your job in the church because you aren't getting paid to do it. But what about those of us who are office-bearers and are getting paid to do it? Well, we too can easily withdraw and say "I don't get paid enough to handle that discipline case. I can't help someone with moral advice on their end-of-life questions because that's above my pay grade. I can't be there for you in your crisis because that's not my job. Take care of it yourself, friend."

Brothers and sisters, do you have a volunteer spirit? Or are you so money-driven that you won't do anything you're not getting paid for? Jesus volunteered to come to Earth without pay.

5. A feckless "faith" in God's presence, v. 11b

Well, the last and most damning sin that Micah mentions is the sin of spiritual presumption. This sin says "I am part of God's church and therefore I'm good." These people, like those later on, in

Jeremiah's time, looked at God's house in the middle of town and said "Nothing bad can happen to us with *Him* here." And of course, God was there and had promised to live there forever. Can you imagine the confidence that would give you? Here in the USA we can feel confidence when we see the fighter jets fly over. We can look at the police station and say "I won't be robbed with this thing right next to my house." We can look at the fire station and say "My house won't burn down with this right here." We can look at the guardrail and say "My car won't go over the edge with this thing here." But brothers and sisters, all of those things pale in comparison to the confidence of knowing that Yahweh God Almighty lives in town. Literally nothing can vanquish Him. Forget the Avengers. Forget Imperial Star Destroyers. Forget the most powerful weapons and beings known to the human race, or imagined by the brains of sci-fi novelists and comic-books artists. Brothers and sisters, God can handle literally any threat, any problem, any attack. The military hardware of the Ancient Near East was child's play to Him. Our military hardware is child's play to Him. The legions of Hell and the utmost efforts of the prince of darkness are no more dangerous to Him than an overstuffed teddy bear is to us. How could you fear geo-political disaster with God in the neighborhood?

Today, we pride ourselves not on our superior geopolitical situation, but on our superior spiritual experience. Someone who reads as much Scripture as me, someone who has come to church every Sunday for as many years as I have, someone who knows all the theology and practices family worship and spends time in prayer every day and shares Scripture verses on Facebook — no disaster can overtake me! I am immune to spiritual attack and certainly to spiritual defeat and apostasy. Right?

B. Their punishment

Wrong. God was more than prepared to sacrifice His own house and His own city and His own people rather than let them off the hook for their tremendous wickedness.

1. Their city's destruction, v. 12a

And so, He tells them that it's because of them that urban Zion will become an open field, with all the buildings plowed under. Jerusalem will be a heap of ruins. Why? Because their sin has made it impossible for them to remain in God's presence. He first threatened to hide His face. Then He said that He would not answer.

2. God's absence, v. 12b

And now He threatens to leave altogether. Why? Because their sins are so bad that He cannot live with them anymore. The equivalent is God abandoning our church and leaving us to function as best as we can without Him. Of course, He also destroyed their city — and in this Covid pandemic, we see what suffering God's judgment looks like in our own context. We see 26 million Americans unemployed. We see tens of thousands dying from a nasty little novel virus. We see the Senate minority leader calling the President a "quack medicine salesman," unfortunately for pretty good reasons. Brothers and sisters, in this judgment, what do we do? We look to the future. We trust that God will restore His dwelling with His people, as the next verse says. And we put our hope in Him in the meantime. Let's flee these sins and seek our Lord Jesus

as the true solution to the problem of God's judgment. His name is Immanuel. He is God with us — and He is the only solution to the problem of God's silence and absence. Christ came to bear that judgment; He endured God-forsakenness. And if you know Him, then you will be spared it, because Immanuel. Amen.