

Jehovah—Defender of the Helpless

Micah 2:1-2; James 1:27

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As essential as is zeal for God's house, faithfulness in doctrine, and purity in worship, we must never ignore nor neglect God's call to show mercy to those who are in need. It is true that faithfulness to the Lord God (as summarized in the first four commandments of the Ten Commandments) is foundational to our being faithful to our neighbor (as summarized in the last six commandments). It is certainly true that the first and great commandment according to Christ is to love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. The second great commandment is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. It is also true that idolatry (in its various manifestations) is the root sin from which all other sins proceed; for if we do not love and honor the Most High God, we will not love and honor man who is made in His image. But it is also true that if we do not love and show mercy to our brother/sister whom we can see, we cannot love God whom we cannot see.

The significance of these scriptural principles is made exceedingly clear as we contrast Micah chapter one with Micah chapter two. For in Micah chapter one, the prophet declares idolatry to be the root sin for which God has brought His covenant law-suit against Israel and Judah and for which God will judge them by sending the Assyrians and Babylonians to desolate their cities and lead them into captivity. However, in Micah chapter two, the prophet addresses the sins which will inevitably follow upon departing from the living God: oppressing the weak and the helpless. God's judgment is likewise stored up and soon to be unleashed against Israel and Judah for their sins against their brethren.

We so often think we can compartmentalize our sins so that they do not affect other areas of our life or affect others around us. But such thinking is a lie. How I remember the argument used by the social engineers to introduce sodomy into society as an alternative lifestyle: "What people do in the privacy of their own homes is their own business and will have no effect upon society at large." Not only has sodomy not been confined to the privacy of the home, but it has fought its evil way into the very fabric of society. Or, dear ones, consider how we are prone to reason in our heart, "If I neglect my secret worship today, it will be ok, it will not affect my life in other areas or lead to more visible sins." Or, "If I harbor bitterness in the deepest recesses of my soul toward a brother/sister, it will not affect my communion with Christ." Or, "If I watch that lusty movie, look at that pornographic magazine, read that steamy novel, listen to that profane music in private where no one else is offended by it and no one sees, it will not manifest itself in my speech or behavior. Sin is not neutral, nor is it static—it always metastasizes and spreads like a malignant cancer to other parts of your life and mine. Sin is a malignancy that will continue to grow unless we hate it, unless we flee its temptation, and unless we avail ourselves of the mercy and grace of Christ to send it into remission.

To have the attitude that sin is "no big deal" because there is forgiveness with God is a frightful presumption and testing of God. God's grace is not to be viewed as a safety net which will save us from the dreaded fall when we take the dive into some area of sin. Although God will pardon sin when it is sincerely repented of, nevertheless, that fall will likely leave many serious scars in our lives and in the lives of others. Therefore, God who is rich in mercy pleads with us: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thessalonians 5:22).

As we consider our text today, the sins of idolatry in Israel and Judah have metastasized and have spread to sins of oppression against their brethren. God brings His covenant law-suit against His unfaithful bride, not only for her idolatry, but also for her turning a deaf ear to the cries of the needy all around her, and for her calloused oppression of the most helpless in her midst.

The main points of the sermon for this Lord's Day are: (1) A Scriptural Overview of God's Care for the Poor and the Helpless; (2) A Scriptural Investigation into the Oppression of Israel and Judah; (3) Practical Considerations of These Truths.

I. A Scriptural Overview of God's Care for the Poor and the Helpless.

A. The Lord our God takes a special interest in the needs and cries of those who are genuinely afflicted and helpless. Throughout the Scriptures, God declares Himself to be the Defender of their rights, and to be their Provider. Herein are both the mercy of God and the fear of God abundantly displayed.

1. In mercy God takes up the cause of the oppressed and needy, and He reaches out to help the fatherless and the widow (Psalm 68:5; Deuteronomy 10:18). Jehovah our God declares that when the cries for mercy and justice of the fatherless, the widow, the poor, and the afflicted go unanswered, when they suffer because their cause is viewed as insignificant, the Almighty God will hear their cry and come to their defense. Furthermore, in mercy God commands the church not only to give to the poor and needy spiritual food for their souls, but also to give to them physical food for their bodies as well: Deuteronomy 24:17-22 (gleaning); Acts 6:1,7 (care of widows); 2 Corinthians 9:1,12,13 (helping needy saints). For, dear ones, the gospel of salvation not only redeems the soul of the believer, but also redeems the body of the believer (the resurrection of the body). In fact, the gospel of Jesus Christ is many times manifested in Scripture by acts of mercy shown to the bodily needs of the poor and needy (Leviticus 25—Year of Jubilee, cf. Luke 4:18; Matthew 14:14; Mathew 15:32). When we show mercy and compassion to the poor, to the fatherless, to the widow, to the afflicted, to those who are oppressed, or to those who mourn, we confirm that we preach the true gospel of free grace through Christ to those who are spiritually hungering and thirsting (Matthew 10:8).

2. Not only is the mercy of God demonstrated in His care for the poor, but also the fear of God is demonstrated in the solemn warnings He issues to those who oppress the needy. In fearful warnings God solemnly declares He will judge those who oppress the poor or needy or who turn a deaf ear to their cries (Exodus 22:22-24; Malachi 3:5).

B. The Scottish ministers who wrote *The First Book of Discipline* of the Church of Scotland understood the duty of the church and the state to do their part in defending the poor and providing for the poor when they addressed the magistrates as follows:

We must crave of your honors, in the name of the Eternal God and of his Son Christ Jesus, that ye have respect to your poor brethren, the laborers and manurers of the ground, who by these cruel beasts, the Papists, have before been oppressed, that their life to them has been dolorous [sorrowful—GLP] and bitter: If ye will have God author and approver of this reformation, ye must not follow their footsteps, but ye must have compassion of [for—GLP] your brethren.

II. A Scriptural Investigation into the Oppression of Israel and Judah (Micah 2:1-2, 8-9).

A. Let us now consider more closely from our text the oppression of the poor that existed in Israel and Judah at the time of Micah's prophecy. Note what the prophet declares to be the first step in oppression of the poor and needy ("Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds" Micah 2:1; "And they covet fields" Micah 2:2). They were coveting and devising iniquity as did Ahab for Naboth's vineyard. Although this coveting is in the mind, yet God's prophet says it is to "work evil." The outward violence or outward robbing of the poor is not where oppression begins. It begins in the heart of man: discontentment with our own outward estate so that we have little or no desire to sacrifice our time, our money, or our comforts to help others (we are so self-absorbed that we cannot see or hear anyone outside our own little world); coveting what belongs to others and striving to obtain it by fraud or force (a tax system that taxes everything you own is one built upon greed and implicit ownership of all that is taxed); and refusing to hear

the cries of the needy and to help them when it is within our power to do so. One does not actively have to devise an evil plan against the helpless in order to be an oppressor, he can passively devise an evil plan against the poor by merely turning a deaf ear to their suffering, by refusing to minister to their needs, by being unwilling to go without some temporal comfort or luxury of his own in order to assist a brother in desperate need.

1. Listen to the words of the *Larger Catechism*, as it explains our duties under the Eighth Commandment:

The duties required in the eighth commandment are . . . giving and lending freely, according to our abilities, and the necessities of others

In fact, the Lord makes it ever so clear that one of the reasons He blesses us with wealth is so that we might show mercy to those brethren who are in need (Ephesians 4:28).

2. Dear ones, when we pray that God might in His rich grace and mercy bless the labor of our hands, or bless a financial investment we have made, is it so that we might bless others or merely bless ourselves? Why do we desire to improve our lot in life? Do the spiritual and physical needs of people predominate in our thoughts, motives, prayers, and work? “That he may have to give to him that needeth” is among the chief purposes stated by God for increasing our wealth.

B. From such devising of iniquity as discontentment, covetousness, and refusing to help those in need proceeds the actual violence of taking fields, houses, and even a man’s heritage (Micah 2:2). A man’s heritage is that which one has an unquestionable right to by the Law of God in nature and in Scripture. It is that inheritance which he has received and has been entrusted to him from his forefathers and which he is obligated to pass on to his children. Here we see the wickedness and oppression of all civil governments that claim an interest (and an implied ownership) in that which even nature says belongs by right to a family (Proverbs 23:10-11).

1. Is there not a particular application of this truth to the doctrine, worship, and government of the church as well? If we are not to remove material landmarks and rob men of their material heritage given to them by their forefathers, how much more are we not to remove spiritual landmarks and rob men of their spiritual heritage given to them by their forefathers at the expense of their own blood. Here is an oppression far more heinous than mere physical oppression. Here is thievery far more serious than mere physical thievery. For this spiritual oppression and thievery robs people of the inheritance purchased for them by the Lord Jesus Christ. If Naboth could not sell to Ahab the physical inheritance received from his forefathers but declared to King Ahab (1 Kings 21:3), how can we sell our spiritual inheritance in doctrine, worship, and government received from our covenanted forefathers?

2. Although no church upon earth has been or is sinless and without error, nevertheless, that truth in doctrine, worship, and government that has been faithfully passed on to us must be diligently protected from all who by reason of discontentment or covetousness would move the landmarks (Philippians 4:16; 1 Timothy 4:6; Revelation 2:25). This is why the covenants of our forefathers are precious to us, for they bind us to the biblical boundaries laid out for us by our parents in the faith.

C. And finally from our text this Lord’s Day, note the personal objects of Israel and Judah’s oppression: not only men, but the weakest and most helpless within the nation, the women and the children (Micah 2:8-9). Again, those whom not only God in His Word reveals to be the most helpless, but those whom nature itself reveals to be most helpless are attacked, plundered, robbed, and spoiled.

1. “The women of my people have ye cast out from their pleasant houses” (Micah 2:9). Women who considered their homes a pleasant place to work by instructing their children, by preparing food and clothing for their families, by making their homes a delightful place for their husbands, these women are

forced to leave them. This may happen by forcibly taking a home from the women, but it also may happen by a government or a husband or family forcing a woman to go to work who desires to remain in the home to minister to her children as God has appointed. There may be times in which single mothers (or wives whose husbands are unable to work) have no other alternatives and necessity compels them to seek work outside the home, but I dare say it is an oppression to force women to work outside the home apart from that necessity.

2. “From their children have ye taken away my glory for ever” (Micah 2:9). If it is robbing God’s glory to rob small children of God’s blessing to them in the form of material sustenance, how much more heinous is it an indescribable oppression to murder them while in the womb of their mother? Atrocity of atrocities against nature and nature’s God is the taking away of God’s glory from children by taking away their lives. We also may oppress our children by taking away God’s glory in not giving them a distinctly Christian education (family worship, secret worship, corporate worship, catechism, history of the martyrs and saints, homeschooling or sound Christian education). What about Sunday Schools? We oppose them as they rob parents of their duty to teach and train their own children. Sunday Schools separate children from parents, and often have unqualified teachers. Sunday Schools were originally a means of outreach to children outside the church, not within the church.

III. Practical Considerations of These Truths.

A. Who are the needy? *The First Book of Discipline* helps us answer this question when it notes:

Every several kirk [church—GLP] must provide for the poor within itself: for fearful and horrible it is, that the poor, whom not only God the Father in his law, but Christ Jesus in his Evangel [gospel—GLP], and the Holy Spirit speaking by St. Paul, has so earnestly commended to our care, are universally so contemned and despised. We are not patrons for stubborn and idle beggars, who, running from place to place, make a craft of their begging, whom the Civil magistrate ought to compel to work, or then punish: But, for the widow and fatherless, the aged, impotent or lamed, who neither can nor may travel [labor] for their sustenance, we say that God commands his people to be careful: and therefore for such, as also for persons of honesty fallen into decay and poverty, ought such provision to be made, that of our abundance their indigence [poverty—GLP] may be relieved.

B. We may not always be able to help as we would like, especially when someone is in desperate need. But do you desire to do so? Does your heart cry out with those in need that God would be their Defender and Provider? You can pray, encourage, babysit, show hospitality, or seek help from others who have the means to help.

C. There is a need for qualified deacons. Pray for men who have hearts to show mercy to others—who are wise, and who are honest.

D. Remember that Christ declares that our love for Him is inseparable from our love for and mercy shown to the brethren (Matthew 25:31-46). “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world” (James 1:27).

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