

# The Prophecy of Micah: *A Castigation of the Corrupt*

Micah 3:1-12

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on September 20, 2020

## Introduction

- ❖ As you may know, we've been going through the book of Micah, which has a lot to say about justice – about knowing justice, respecting justice, and doing justice (6:8). This was important because the prophet lived during a time in Israel's history where great sins and injustices were being carried out. The strong preyed on the weak. The rich exploited the poor. **And the nation's leaders – their kings, judges, prophets, and priests – either turned a blind eye or perpetuated the problem themselves.**
  - The prophet Micah has the unenviable task of being the one to confront power; to issue a rebuke against those in authority; to castigate the corrupt. That's risky business. But that's the job of a prophet. **Prophets are called to boldly speak to power and to call out abuses.** In the Scriptures, we see Nathan calling out David; Elijah confronting Ahab; Jonah being sent to Nineveh and its king; and John the Baptist challenging Herod.
  
- ❖ **These are examples of God's prophets speaking God's truth openly and publicly.** Their messages weren't delivered within a synagogue or church, to the faithful, to an audience that largely agreed with them. No, these prophets were functioning in all corners and on all levels of society, boldly speaking to power, wherever it's found within any authority structure.
  - That's normal in prophetic ministry. Prophets didn't just speak to God's people. **They spoke to *all* peoples – particularly to people in positions of power and influence, calling them to exercise their power and influence for justice and righteousness.**
  
- ❖ **But this public, confrontational nature of prophetic ministry – so normal in the Scriptures – is so abnormal for us today.** Preaching, for example, is understood as a form of prophetic ministry, where you proclaim the Word of God. But in churches like ours – for those of us from an evangelical, Bible church background – **our image of preaching is often that of a shepherd feeding and encouraging his flock. We don't picture him going after wolves, rebuking them for their violent ways.** That's too confrontational for our taste.
  - We're not used to preachers speaking to power; challenging abuses of power by those in authority; calling for justice to be done. We get nervous when preachers preach like that. **It sounds like something you'd hear in the pulpit of a liberal church committed to the social gospel.** We want our preachers focused on helping people to believe and to follow a personal Savior. We're not sure if we want them addressing divisive or controversial issues in the news. It feels like they're getting too political. Just stick to preaching the Bible.
  
- ❖ This morning we plan to do just that – to preach the Bible. **But I hope you see that the Bible is calling – not just preachers – but all God's people to play a prophetic role in society.** To openly and publicly speak his truth in the public square. To not limit our Christianity to the pursuit of personal piety. **But to make it about piety *plus* prophetic proclamation.** So as we study Micah 3, we're going to see three sharp rebukes against those who have violated justice through the abuse of their power. The bottom line warning is that the very justice that these corrupt leaders have been ignoring – is coming. It's coming for them.

## Rebuke of those who dehumanize others into consumable objects

- ❖ Now Micah organizes this chapter with three separate addresses, three separate but related rebukes. Let's consider the first one found in vv1-4. Here we see a **(1) Rebuke of those who dehumanize others into consumable objects**. Now in v1, the audience is identified as the *“heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel.”* That includes leaders of the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel but with a focus on Judah. Commentators will tell you that Micah prophesied this oracle under the reign of Hezekiah, king of Judah. By this time, the Assyrians had already wiped out the north and were threatening Judah.
  
- ❖ So listen to v1, *“And I said: Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice?”* These heads, these leaders, were responsible for knowing and administering justice. **So we're talking about ruling magistrates.** Judges in the land, of which the king himself would be the highest judge.
  - **Courts in ancient Israel were meant to be a recourse for the weak against the abuses of the strong.** They were an achievement of civilization. Imagine if you lived in a society where might makes right. Where the rich and powerful could do whatever they wanted because no one could stop them or check their power. That would be terrifying. It's a societal achievement to have a functioning court system.
  
- ❖ But *functioning* is the keyword. **In Micah's day, the very courts designed to be a recourse for the weak became the instrument of their oppression.** It mentions later, in v11, that these judges accepted bribes to turn a blind eye to corruption. In chapter 2, we saw how the rich lent money to the poor at exorbitant rates, leading them to default on their loans.
  - Then, the rich would foreclose the land, taking from the poor their family inheritance. The end result was that the poor in Judah were becoming increasingly dependent on wealthy landowners who were taking advantage of them. And when they turned to the courts for help (for justice), they were turned away or abused even further.
  
- ❖ **Now Micah gets the attention of these corrupt judges by using some very grotesque imagery.** He does this to convey the wickedness of their behavior. Listen to vv2-3, *“<sup>2</sup>you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones, <sup>3</sup>who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a pot, like flesh in a cauldron.”*
  - He's describing cannibalism! Notice how God emphasizes how these are *people* you're abusing. My people. **And yet you've denied the image of God imprinted on the soul of each person.** Instead, you're treating them like animals. Like livestock prepared for slaughter, to end up like meat in a nice stew for you to consume.
  
- ❖ And that's Micah's point. **These judges have dehumanized people, treating them like animals, like consumable objects.** When a poor Israelite entered their court, pleading for justice, they didn't see a person anymore – precious in the sight of God – they saw financial profit. They saw an object that they can use and consume to serve themselves. They chewed up the poor and spat them out when they were done with them.

- ❖ **Now if you think about it, this way of treating people – mistreating them as less than human – plagues all societies, in all generations.** From ancient Israel to our modern day. Just think about how some of the great injustices of our day are attributed to a similar dehumanization of those made precious in the image of God.
  - **Racism is a pernicious way of dehumanizing people, treating them as less than human because of skin color.** And sadly the justice system in our nation has a sordid past of ignoring race-based inequalities or even perpetuating them. In such cases, the injustice needs to be exposed and publicly rebuked. And Lord-willing, Christians will be the first to speak up.
    - That’s the enduring legacy of the **Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s**. Civil rights leaders, most of whom were pastors, spoke to power and called out various abuses. And instead of dividing society even further – like we see people doing today – Christians in the Civil Rights Movement appealed to our common humanity, to our better angels. Reminding us that – no matter our outward appearance – we all share inwardly the image of God.
  
- ❖ **Another injustice of our day would be the pornography industry** – in the way it dehumanizes women, treating them as less than human, as mere objects to gratify a man’s lust. **And what’s more alarming is the mounting evidence that porn consumption is fueling the sex trade.** Sex trafficking is the most profitable form of human trafficking, and pornography creates the demand for that wicked industry. How can we treat pornography as a harmless vice? And how can we stay silent when the courts protect pornography as a harmless form of free expression? No, it’s an injustice against women that deserves rebuke.
  - **And the same argument can be made against the abortion industry** – in the way it dehumanize babies, treating them as less than human, based on their developmental stage, based on their size. I know Micah was being figurative in vv2-3, but it’s heartbreaking to know that many of the surgical abortive procedures come very close to resembling the violence he’s depicting. Those procedures can only be justified by dehumanizing the unborn. And the courts – where you’d expect to find recourse for the weakest and most helpless in society – have largely ignored the cries of the unborn and continue to protect the supposed right to unjustly end their life.
  
- ❖ So whether we’re dealing with abortion, or pornography and the sex trade, or racial inequalities, or economic injustices like in Micah’s day – **whatever the abuse, it is this dehumanizing way of treating people that elicits God’s anger and moves him to respond in judgment.**
  - That’s what Micah stresses in v4. Those in positions of power and influence who perpetuate these injustices – who ignore the cries of the oppressed – will themselves one day cry out to the Lord and hear no answer. *“Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.”* **God will hide his face from them on that day of judgment.** His rebuke will be final and irreversible.

- ❖ Church, what does this mean for us? **It means we have to be attentive – not just to the sins and abuses that take place in the pews – but to what’s happening in the public square.** As Christians, we need to regain our prophetic voice, and we do that by calling out injustices and living out God’s righteousness. Stewarding whatever power he’s entrusted to us to work towards the good of our society. And at the same time, we must be careful *not* to abuse our own power and to treat others as less than who they are in the image of God.
  - **Thankfully, we have Jesus as the best example of how to wield great power and influence for good.** When he came to this earth, he didn’t come to use people. He didn’t treat us like objects to be consumed for his own gain. No, instead he served us. He offered himself up for us. **In fact, he invites his followers to consume him – to eat his flesh and drink his blood.** We’re referring, of course, to the Lord’s Supper, where we partake of the elements in remembrance of the death that he died for us.
    - **If we stick close to Jesus and let his sacrificial death shape our attitude, it’ll help us recapture a prophetic voice.** To speak into society – not from an attitude of superiority – but from a posture of Christ-like humility, that is humble but still bold enough to speak against injustice.

### **Rebuke of those who commodify others into revenue streams**

- ❖ That’s the first rebuke found in vv1-4, directed at the judges of Israel. Let’s turn our attention to vv5-8, and we’ll see a second rebuke. This one is directed towards the prophets of Israel. Here we see a **(2) Rebuke of those who commodify others into revenue streams.** Micah is calling out prophets who are misusing their office to profit off others. Listen to v5, *“Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing into their mouths.”*
  - The way that verse starts with *“Thus says the LORD”* – that’s the formula for a prophet. Whatever comes out of your mouth when you’re prophesying should be what the LORD says. **You only speak God’s Word. His truth. No matter if the audience wants to hear it or not.** But that’s not how these prophets were operating.
- ❖ **They were functioning more like fortune tellers.** You get what you pay for. If you approach them for a word from the LORD and bring with you a nice gift – some delicacy to eat – they’ll give you a positive, uplifting word from God. But if you come empty handed, then they’ll leave you with a negative, damning message.
  - This is obviously a gross abuse of power and authority. They’re manipulating people. **Only valuing you based on how much they can profit off you.** That’s what we mean by commodifying people into revenue streams. The very people they are called to serve are just serving as sources of income.
- ❖ The contemporary example of this injustice is not hard to identify. **Prosperity preachers and religious hucksters are the modern equivalents of these prophets under rebuke.** When you hear a preacher on stage or on the screen, telling you that they’ll offer up a prayer for you or promise you some kind of healing – if you show your faith by planting a seed (and by that they mean a monetary donation) – then you know who and what you’re dealing with.

- ❖ They're false prophets treating you as a revenue stream. You're being commodified. **Now I'm not saying any church that encourages its members to give is perpetuating this injustice.** There is a legitimate place for asking members to financially give, but it must not be to serve the bottom line. Churches should treat givers not as revenue streams – but as worshipers and co-laborers in its mission.
  - **So when you give to our church, don't do it with an expectation that you're going to get a better sermon or that God is going to bless you more.** No, you should give as an act of worship and an expression of commitment to our mission to make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations.
  
- ❖ **So stay alert to the religious leaders of our day who treat their followers like commodities.** Like what the prophets in Micah's day were doing. Now let's keep reading and see the consequences these prophets would face. Look at vv6-7, *"Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God."*
  - So because of their corrupt speech, they'll get no speech from God. The Lord will darken their counsel. **And with no answers from him, they'll lose prophetic authority and instead gain shame.** That act of covering your lips (or literally your beard) was understood in those days as a sign of shameful humiliation.
  
- ❖ But Micah, on the other hand, exemplifies the proper motivation of a prophet. Listen to what he says in v8, *"But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin."*
  - **Where did Micah get the boldness to speak to power?** To speak *against* power, to declare the transgressions and sins of those in positions of highest authority? How did he have the moral courage? It's because he was filled with the right stuff.
    - The prophets in v5 were filled with greed and motivated by money. **But Micah, on the other hand, was filled with power in the Spirit and motivated by justice.** That's what enabled him to speak so boldly – to the point that he openly challenged sinful people and sinful structures.
  
- ❖ Friends, that's what we need today. **We need more Christians who are willing to speak to power and to call out abuses.** To rebuke unjust systems and authority structures. To do so in the name of the LORD – the LORD who stands on the side of justice and righteousness.
  - But if we're filled with a love of money – if financial security or career advancement is what drives us – we'll quickly shut our mouths and get in line. We won't rock the boat or challenge the status quo. Especially if doing so may affect our revenue stream.
    - **Only those who are filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, with justice and might – only they will be liberated from the love of money and be able to preach boldly to power, no matter the cost.** May that be us! I so want that to describe us as a church. That we may be a Spirit-filled people who have regained our prophetic voice and the courage to rebuke injustice.

## **Rebuke of those who violate justice and yet feel securely justified**

- ❖ So we've seen two rebukes so far in Micah 3. There's one more in vv9-12. This third rebuke is issued more generally to all the leaders of Israel – to her judges, prophets, and priests. Because they have collectively failed in their duty to lead. And yet they remain aloof, with a false sense of security, thinking they're good with God. But here we see a **(3) Rebuke of those who violate justice and yet feel securely justified.**
  - Listen to vv9-10, *"<sup>9</sup>Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight, <sup>10</sup>who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity."*
  
- ❖ The heads of Judah, their priests, and their prophets were responsible to know justice and to administer it rightly. But instead, it says they detest justice and make crooked that which is straight. **Now the specific abuse that Micah had in mind possibly refers to the grueling manual labor that many were forced into, as the city of Jerusalem significantly expanded during Hezekiah's reign.**
  - After the northern kingdom was defeated, Jerusalem was flooded by refugees from the north, and the city grew three to fourfold in size. There were massive building projects going on. Most of it focused on preparing to survive a siege by the Assyrians. This included the building of city walls to strengthen its defenses and underground tunnels to divert water into the city. **These projects required a massive amount of manual labor and extracted a severe toll on human life.** But these leaders either turned a blind eye or directly profited off their backs.
  
- ❖ Keep reading in v11, *"Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money."* So these judges, priests, and prophets were all greedy and simply looking out for themselves. **And notice how they were clueless to how wicked their behavior was, how noxious their actions were before God.**
  - He was disgusted by them. And yet they had no clue. They had a false sense of security. Keep reading, *"yet they lean on the LORD and say, "Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us."*
    - **They looked at the temple of God in the midst of the city – situated on Mount Zion – and they felt an overwhelming sense of confidence that God was on their side.** They justified their behavior and assuaged their consciences by the apparent presence of the Lord in their midst. Clearly, things aren't *that* bad if God is still among us. If he's still on our side.
  
- ❖ Now they were clearly mistaken, and you would think that no one thinks like that anymore. That no one would imagine you could participate in grave injustices; that you could abuse your power; that you could dehumanize and commodify people into objects to serve yourself – and *still* think that God is on your side. No one could be that foolish, right?

- ❖ But sadly that's the state of things today. **Government leaders, political parties, religious leaders including pastors – many of them would appeal to our identity as a supposedly Christian nation, and thereby assume that God is on our side.** That God blesses America.
  - We feel securely justified. But all the while, there are grave injustices being committed. **Hundreds of thousands of human beings are being dehumanized, commodified, and consumed to gratify the needs and hunger of others.**
    - We already mentioned racial inequalities, pornography, sex trafficking, and abortion. There are people this very day being oppressed, being manipulated, being slaughtered in these situations. And there are leaders across the spectrum – governmental, judicial, civil, corporate, religious – leaders in all these spheres who either ignore the problems or perpetuate them.
  
- ❖ **How can we be so brash to assume that God is on the side of this nation?** If anything, this nation needs to get on the side of God – on the side of justice and righteousness as revealed in Scripture. **What's going to turn our nation around is repentance – not an election.**
  - I know so many people are pinning their hopes on their party winning big in November. But no matter who's in office, the question remains the same. **It's not about whose side is God on. It's about who's on God's side.**
  
- ❖ **And if we refuse to repent, if we continue to tolerate the injustices and abuses of power in our land, then God will come in judgment as he did for Judah.** That's what we see in v12. Look there. It starts with "*Therefore*". In light of all these injustices, this is what's coming. "*Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.*"
  - In other words, Micah predicts that the temple of the LORD – that which you assume is a symbol of God's favor on this city – that temple will be utterly destroyed. That mountain top called Zion, where the temple proudly sits, will become a patch of wild forest. That's the judgment coming upon them. It's a depressing way to end a chapter.
  
- ❖ But even though Micah 3 has a pretty dismal ending, if we keep reading in the book, we'll see oracles of hope. We'll see that God is not done with Zion. In chapter 4, we're told there will be another temple, another house of God on the mountain of the LORD (4:2). **But then in chapter 5, Micah moves the spotlight off the temple and onto a future Shepherd King, who will arise from the town of David, from Bethlehem.**
  - And as the story goes, this Shepherd King will accomplish what the kings, priests, and prophets of Israel failed to do. He will succeed them as the Good King, the Great High Priest, and the True Prophet who not only speaks truth but is Truth himself.
  
- ❖ And when he finally did appear on the scene, this Messiah predicted, like Micah, the destruction of the temple in his day. **But unlike Micah, Jesus had the audacity to point to himself as the new temple of God (Jn 2:18-22).**

- **What Jesus meant was that he is now where atonement for sin will be made.** He is where the worship of God will now be conducted. If you want to meet the LORD, you don't go to a building – you go to a person. The person of Jesus Christ.
  
- ❖ Friends, let's not forget that – **that gospel hope found in the person and work of Christ.** Micah, as we'll see in the rest of the book, points his audience in the direction of that hope. So please don't get the impression that a prophetic voice only sounds like a rebuke. That prophetic voice we need to recapture also sounds like hope.
  - **When we rebuke those who violate justice, we also hold out gospel hope that they will repent – that they will seek God's face and find it shining on them.** Historically, we know that Micah's prophetic voice had that effect. **Jeremiah 26:17-19** tells us that Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem responded to Micah's preaching with repentance. And the Lord spared them. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple didn't occur in their day. Because they listened and turned to the Lord.
  
- ❖ So if anyone listening is unsure if God's face is shining on you or if it's hidden from you – if you're not sure if you're safe from the coming judgment of God – **then your only hope, your only recourse, is to go to the temple of God and seek forgiveness. Go to Jesus.** Look to him for mercy and trust that justice for your sins was nailed to his cross. Go to Jesus, my friends, and receive his abundant mercy.