

Lousy Leaders

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[0 : 00] Well, voting is open. So you can actually already vote. And of course, the election itself is this coming Saturday.

Are you ready? And I wonder which leader is worth your vote. I said that this morning and someone yelled out neither. Okay. Oops.

Reader's Digest has this joke from America on Election Day and they say, we don't approve of political jokes. We've seen too many get elected. I went, ooh, oops. But let me tell you, though, that compared to Israel's leaders, they are good.

Israel's leaders from Micah chapter 3 today are worse than a joke. In fact, as we heard, they are like shepherds who actually eat their sheep, which is point one in your outlines, verse one in your Bibles.

Micah says, Then I said, listen, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel, should you not embrace justice? Now, before we keep going, I should remind you, particularly if you weren't here with us last week, that the book of Micah is made up of three sermons, each beginning with the call to listen.

[1 : 19] We're in the middle sermon. We're only going to do chapter 3 today because there's too many chapters to cover. We'll look at the rest of the sermon next week. And today he particularly wants the leaders or rulers of Israel to listen.

Now, as I said last week, the names Israel and Jacob, they're interchangeable. And originally it referred to the whole nation. I didn't print it this week, but I printed this map on your sheets last week.

I've got a different map today, which we'll come to later. But originally it included the green bit at the top, which kept the name Israel, and the brown bit down the bottom, Judah. And Israel and Jacob, that was originally referred to the whole kingdom before it was divided into two.

And so the names Israel and Jacob, they can either refer to the northern part, the north kingdom, or actually to the whole of God's people.

And I think it's this latter sense that Micah is talking about here today, because later on in verse 10 and 12, he will talk about the consequences to the capital of the south, to Jerusalem or Zion.

[2 : 27] And so it seems like Micah lines up all the leaders of God's people, Israel, Jacob, with a particular focus of those in Jerusalem and says, listen, should you not embrace justice?

Should you not love it and live it? Should you not practice it in your jobs? For us, our leaders in government are separate to our judges in court.

It's the judges who administer justice, and our leaders in government make policy and the like. But in Micah's day, the leaders had a bigger role to play.

They were known as shepherds who were to lead and care for God's flock, his people. And Israel got so big for Moses to handle that earlier on in Deuteronomy chapter one, Moses said, look, I took leading men from your tribes, wise and respected men, and pointed them to have authority over you.

And they had these different roles as commanders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens, and as tribal officials. And I charged your judges at that time, hear the disputes between your people and judge fairly.

[3 : 39] Whether the case is between two Israelites or between an Israelite and a foreigner residing among you do not show partiality. And so a leader in ancient Israel could be a commander, a military commander, who leads their tribe into battle.

They could be a separate person who's a tribal official or they might even have a dual role who negotiates with other tribes. And they also had the role of judging disputes, of administering justice.

And so for us today, it was like our local council being our law court, one and the same. Our premier being our judge, our high court judge or state judge.

There was no separation of powers, you see. But they were to judge fairly, without partiality, it says. But these civil leaders actually despise justice.

And Micah gets quite graphic with the implications. See verse two? He says, You civil leaders who hate good and love evil, who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones, who eat my people's flesh and strip off their skin, break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot.

[5 : 06] Micah's saying, look, you guys in the courthouse and parliament house, you may as well put a sign at the front that says, Abattoirs. Because that's what you're doing by administering injustice.

That's what you're doing by denying justice. That's what you're doing by failing to defend the defenceless. It's as though these leaders are allowing their people to be sliced and diced.

Metaphorically, you realise, of course. Last week, for example, we heard how the powerful, in chapter two, who wanted land and seized it and leaving the people with nothing.

And I wonder if what's happening here, reading between the lines, is these powerful are giving these leaders, these judges, a bribe, allowing the powerful to take the land. Because in verse 11, if you just skip to verse 11 for a moment, our top right-hand corner of the page there, notice what we're told.

Jerusalem's leaders judge for a bribe. And so I wonder if that's what's happening.

[6 : 16] You know, the powerful giving these leaders money to rule in their favour so they could take the land from others. And in this way, these greedy leaders fed off the people, like shepherds who eat their sheep.

Between 2003 and 2008, these two judges in the front of the picture, Mark Ciaverella and Michael Conahan, both Pennsylvanian court judges, took \$2.8 million in bribes to shut down the county-run juvenile detention centre and actually send more kids to the privately-owned detention centres for kickbacks.

Because the more kids that got sent to the privately-owned, the more money the government would give and the more money the privately-owned detention centres would kick back to the judges.

It was called the Kids for Cash Scandal. And Judge Ciaverella sent children as young as eight years old into these detention centres for maximum sentences, many of whom were first-time offenders and were guilty of petty things like shoplifting a set of baseball cards all so that he could get more money from the privately-owned centres.

Here are greedy leaders who are supposed to love justice, embrace it, taking bribes at the expense of others slicing and dicing these kids, as it were.

[7 : 48] Or closer to home, I don't know if you remember this, it was back in 2019, a developer paid \$1.2 million in bribes to councillors at Casey Council for contracts to develop land.

Here again, are greedy councillors not working for the good of their community, which includes suburbs like Berwick, actually, but working for their own good. Or even closer to home, given what's happening this week, our Premier is being investigated by the anti-corruption watchdog again.

And just because I want to be fair, the Andrews government has also referred the opposition leader to the same anti-corruption watchdog. I don't know who to vote for now.

But God takes all such lousy civil leadership seriously. And we know He does because He won't let it slide, but He'll judge it justly. Do you see verse 4?

Then they, that is the civil leaders, will cry out to the Lord, but He will not answer them. At that time, at their time of judgment, He will hide His face from them.

[8 : 56] Why? Because of the evil they have done. You see, unless they repent, these civil leaders will be judged. And as we saw last week, it is just, isn't it? For just as they ignored the cries of those who came to them for help, so God will ignore their cries when they come to Him for help.

In fact, Proverbs 21 says almost exactly the same thing. Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered. I mentioned last week that Micah's name means who is like Yahweh, who is like our God, who takes such lousy leadership seriously.

And it's the same for spiritual leaders too, point two. Have a look at verse 5. This is what the Lord says. As for the prophets who lead my people astray, they proclaim peace if they have something to eat, but prepare to wage war against anyone who refuses to feed them.

Here God Himself speaks instead of Micah, perhaps because lousy spiritual leadership is even worse than lousy civil leadership.

And God said His spiritual leaders lead His people astray. Instead of speaking the truth, they'll speak peace, which is the Hebrew word shalom and includes prosperity.

[10 : 25] They'll preach peace and prosperity if you feed them. But they'll wage war against you, perhaps call down curses if you don't feed them. In fact, they'll proclaim whatever you want for a price.

Again, if you skip over to verse 11, that's what we see there. It says, second line of verse 11, her priests teach for a price and her prophets tell fortunes for money.

Here are prophets who preach for a price. They're driven not by people's need, but by their own greed, aren't they? And so instead of preaching the truth that people need to hear, they'll preach whatever you like for a price.

It's like me saying, if you want me to declare that you'll have a blessed and happy Christmas this year, then for the low, low price of 20 bucks, I'll preach that to you. I was hoping a few more people would laugh because you know I'm being silly, right?

And yet sadly, as ridiculous as that sounds and is, it still happens in different forms. One form is called the prosperity gospel, which is the more money you give to the church, the more prosperous you'll be in life.

[11 : 43] And so in 2019, Karen Affair did a story on a growing church movement called the C3 Church, founded by Phil and Chris Pringle, and they preach at the top there, God is brilliant with ledgers, God is the most perfect accountant, he knows everything you give, and he'll make sure it comes back to you with interest.

And then the article goes on to say, they preach, go make millions and give it to the house of God, and the journalist says, and that's okay because if you give money to C3, God will bless you with more money in return.

return. But this is the prosperity gospel, it's not about building storing up treasure in heaven, and it's actually next door to us.

There's a C3 church in Ringwood, actually. But preaching for a price may not just be in terms of money, it could also be in terms of acceptability.

Like many churches today who have changed their tune when it comes to marriage. And let me also say that the Bible is clear that we're to love all people. Some churches, some conservative churches go too far the other way and they don't love everyone.

[12 : 58] But we're to love all people, just not all behavior. We're to accept all people, just not all choices. And this means welcoming all people, that they might come to Christ in repentance and faith, find forgiveness and life, and then together, follow Christ, living his way as our loving Lord.

That's what the Bible says. Some churches have changed their tune and preach that we must love all people's behavior and choices too, but what if they choose to barrack for Collingwood? But interestingly, they've changed their tune around the time society changed.

Coincidence? Or could it be they've preached for the price of acceptability? either way, since these prophets here in Micah refuse to speak the truth of God's word, then God will refuse to speak to them.

Verse 6. Therefore, night will come over you without visions from God, darkness without divination. The sun will set for the prophets and the day will go dark for them.

The seers will be ashamed and the diviners disgraced. They will all cover their faces because there is no answer, no word from God.

[14 : 22] The spiritual leaders will have no answer from God, no visions, just silence, silence of darkness and night. The sun will set on them, the time will come when they're disgraced and ashamed.

For since they refuse to speak the truth of God's word, then God will refuse to speak to them. Who is like our God, who takes lousy spiritual leadership this seriously?

In fact, the New Testament warns spiritual leaders even more harshly than civil leaders. I like James chapter 3 for example, where those who teach will be judged more strictly.

That's how seriously God takes it. For those in Micah's day, this would be when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians on their day of judgment, which is what Micah is actually trying to warn them about.

And so unlike these prophets who preach lies for a price, Micah will preach the truth, even if it's unpalatable, that they might repent and be saved.

[15:24] Verse 8. But as for me, says Micah, 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.

Micah is filled with power or strength to persevere, with justice despite corruption, with might or boldness despite opposition, and with God's spirit, who no doubt enables him to do all that. But God's spirit is also listed as one of these four, because God's spirit was given to God's prophet to speak the truth of God's word. That's what Micah will do.

He will preach the truth even if it's unpalatable, like calling out Israel's sin, which no one likes hearing, do they? I mean, hands up if you like being told you're wrong.

We don't, no one does. As we heard last week, people prefer to hear wine and beer for everyone, but that's not going to save them if it's not true, is it?

[16:37] And so Micah proclaims God's truth even if it's unpalatable so that they might repent. Because that stake is not just the lives of these leaders but also the people they lead.

Because lousy leadership in Israel will lead to the liquidation of the land. Point three. Here Micah summarizes Israel's leadership both civil and spiritual.

Verse nine he says, Hear this, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right, who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with wickedness.

Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money. That's the summary. And then he comments on their denial that judgment won't come.

He says, Yet they look for the Lord's support and say, Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us. You see, they thought the Lord is amongst them.

[17:37] That is, they've got the temple. That's where God dwelt. That's how the Lord was amongst them at the temple. And for them, the temple became like a lucky charm, a rabbit's foot, a safe house.

So they thought, no, no disgrace will befall us. No judgment will come upon us. But the temple won't save them. And in fact, because of them, even the people will suffer.

Verse 12. Therefore, because of you, lousy leaders, Zion will be ploughed like a field. Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble. The temple hill, a mound overgrown with thickets.

In other words, the whole land is liquidated. Everything must go. First, the people of Zion or Jerusalem will be ploughed like a field. A plough clears a field and uproots the soil.

So the people will be cleared and uprooted, sent off to exile. Second, the city will be reduced to rubble. And thirdly, the temple itself will be deserted.

[18:39] The temple they trusted in, deserted and overgrown with thickets. And this, verse 12, is because of you leaders. Because leaders can either make or break a community, can't they?

I just look at Sri Lanka where the government has been greedy and corrupt. and feeding off the people and now the country is in turmoil. Economic crisis putting rights in peril.

There's food shortages and these women are waiting for petrol and kerosene to light lanterns and run generators. And at one point, I think it was May or June this year, their inflation rate was 54%. Kind of makes our inflation look pretty good after all. people. It's the worst economic crisis since it gained independence in 1948, all because of lousy civil leaders.

Or think of churches that have collapsed or split, or people who've walked away from the faith because of a lousy spiritual leader. The church I grew up in went through a church split because of one minister.

[19:51] No wonder God takes it so seriously. No wonder he sent Micah to preach against it that they and the people might repent and be saved.

Which as I said last week under Hezekiah, they did in 701 BC. So if you've got your map on the back of your outline, now's the time to pull it out. So 722 BC, the Assyrians took the northern kingdom and renamed it Samaria, which is why it's all in green and all belongs to Assyria.

And it's not called Israel, it's called Samaria. But 21 years later in 701 BC, they followed that red line down the Great Trunk Road, which is a kind of ancient highway, and they entered into Judah and they took all those towns, or they laid waste to those towns that we heard in Micah chapter 1 last week, including that red dot, which was Micah's hometown of Moresheth.

And then they kind of went east and then up to Jerusalem to the very gate. But Hezekiah listened to Micah.

In fact, in Jeremiah, which comes later on, Jeremiah quotes our verse 12 from our passage with a lesson to learn. He says, Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah. [21 : 10] He told all the people of Judah, this is what the Lord Almighty says, and then he quotes our verse 12. Zion will be ploughed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill, a mound overgrown with thickets.

And then he says, did not Hezekiah fear the Lord and seek his favor? Did he not repent? And did not the Lord relent so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them?

Who is like our God who will relent if people repent? And yet sadly, none of the kings after Josiah onwards during this time listen to Jeremiah.

And so Jerusalem eventually was liquidated, this time not by the Assyrians but the Babylonians.

And so thank God he has sent another leader for us, the Lord Jesus, a better prophet, a better priest, a better king, a leader like no other.

At Christmas time as we heard from our second reading, we remember the birth of Jesus the Lord, the Messiah, the leader of all people. And when he came into our world, he did not come in pomp and ceremony and with great greed, no, he came as a vulnerable child born not in a palace but in a stable, placed not in a crib but in an animal feeding trough.

[22 : 37] Can you get any more humble? What a contrast to these greedy leaders here. And with the spirit anointed by the spirit, he went off and did ministry and proclaimed the truth of God's kingdom even though it was unpalatable to many like the Pharisees.

He came not for his own good but for our good and not to be served but to serve and to even give his life as a ransom for us. And so instead of us paying the priest a price, Jesus paid the price for us, paying for our sin, that we might be saved from judgment and lead us through this life, through life's ups and downs and even through death to life in the world to come.

Could you get a leader more different to Israel's leaders and even to our leaders today? thank God for Jesus.

Is he not a leader worth believing in and following? And so do you? Do you trust in Jesus? And for us who do, then firstly will you pray for our earthly leaders, both spiritual and civil?

Not just for their sake but for yours because how they lead impacts us, doesn't it? And can I say thank you to those who pray for the wardens and the parish councillors and the staff here at HTD.

[24 : 15] It's terrific, thank you. We need your prayers. But we're also to pray for our governments. As Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2, we're to pray for kings and all those in authority.

No matter who is elected this Saturday, we are to pray for them that we may live peaceful and quiet lives, openly godly and holy, that people might come to Christ because that's what God wants to see.

He wants to see people saved. And so no matter who wins the election this coming Saturday, do pray for them, won't you? And secondly, will you lead like Christ and unlike Israel's leaders?

Our leadership is not limited to formal positions but it can include wherever you have influence, like amongst friends or family with kids, nieces and nephews and the like, grandchildren, or in areas at work or social groups or amongst friends or even at church.

Whatever area you have influence in, will you lead with justice for the good of others above your own good? Will you speak the truth in love but even if it's unpalatable?

[25 : 34] Will you lead like Christ? And lastly, will you continue to follow Christ as your loving leader? These words are beautiful words.

It's Matthew chapter 11. It's the wrong chapter there but it's the right verse. Listen to these beautiful words. Jesus said, Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light. Imagine that being an election campaign promise.

How good would that be? Is there another leader worth following like him? one whose very heart is gentle and humble, who genuinely cares for you and can empathize with you?

One whose yoke is light and easy because it comes with ongoing forgiveness and mercy compared to the yoke of the law where we feel the full weight of sin and guilt?

[26 : 43] A leader who gives rest for our souls, rest from anxiety in this life and eternal rest in the life to come? Is there another leader more worthy of our vote?

More than our vote. Worthy of our lives? So let's pray that we would follow him. Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we thank you so much for the goodness of Jesus, that he is indeed a leader like no other.

Father, we pray that you would help us to follow him with all our lives and for all our lives. Help us as we follow him to be prayerful for our own leaders and also help us, we pray, in our areas of leadership to lead like him, him who is humble and gentle, him who came to serve rather than be served.

God, we ask it all in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen.