

Condemnation of Leaders

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[0 : 00] If you could keep your Bibles open at Micah chapter 3 on page 818.

We'll be looking at that passage in just a moment. I want to start, however, with a well-known story. I'm sure you'll know this. There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.

The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little lamb he had bought. He raised it and it grew up with him and his children.

It shared his food, drank from his cup, and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him.

Instead, he took the lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him. David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die.

[1 : 12] Nathan said to David, You are the man. Then David said, I have sinned against the Lord. Indeed, he had sinned against the Lord.

That is the story from 2 Samuel, when the prophet Nathan went to David to rebuke him over his adultery with Bathsheba. Remember, he lusted after her, he committed adultery with her, and she became pregnant, and then to get himself out of the mess he had created, David had her husband murdered.

And rather than just going to David and saying, Look, you're a murderer and an adulterer, Nathan the prophet told that metaphoric story to give him a different perspective, a picture of what his sin actually looked like.

And he gave him a God's eye view of his sin and of the way that sin had twisted and perverted David. And so David's response was his condemnation, That man should die.

You are the man. But at least David had enough love of God left, enough decency left to repent. You are the man.

[2 : 19] Now this is what the prophet Micah is doing in this passage we're looking at today. In this extraordinary passage, surely one of the bleakest in the Bible, certainly in Micah.

For what Micah is doing as he speaks into the situation of Israel in the 8th century is giving a God's eye view of what sin actually looks like, of what their sin looks like to God.

He's giving them a different perspective. He's getting some distance and he is saying, This is what sin has made you. And what Micah is saying to them is that their sin has perverted them and made it impossible for God to be with them.

Well, we have a very beautiful spring day today here. But I do want to talk to you very briefly about sin. About sin from God's point of view.

Because sin is one of those very abstract things in our lives. We know we shouldn't sin. We know that it's not something we ought to do in our lives. But the consequences of sin and the reality of sin can seem very remote, very abstract.

[3 : 28] It's an idea. And anyways, on the scale of things, my sins really aren't any worse than anybody else's. And there are plenty worse than me. But this passage is about how God views sin in His people.

What it looks like from God's point of view when sin takes root in His holy people. And we are God's people now. And when we look at this passage, you'll see that while there is language of condemnation and rejection for sin, there is also, at the end, a wonderful ray of hope.

If you just look at the passage, you'll see in verses 1 through 4, Micah addresses the leaders of the nations, both north and south. Remember, Israel has been divided.

He's addressing the whole nation. And he does the same in verses 5 through 7. He addresses the religious elite, the prophets. And then in verses 8 to the end, Micah speaks plainly about the state of sin in the nation and prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem.

And I want to look at this under three headings. The first is leaders without justice. Second, prophets without visions. And third, a nation without God. First, leaders without justice.

[4 : 46] And I said, Here, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, is it not for you to know justice, you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people and their flesh from off their bones, 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 kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.

That's a nice little bit of reading for you on a Sunday morning. But you see, the sting is in that rhetorical question at the beginning. Should you not know justice?

Yes, they should have known. Yes, they did know. The point is that God had spoken to them and made His will for them, His purpose for them, His intentions for them quite clear.

And at the end of the passage, we see their sin spelt out, their leaders judged for a bribe. It's this total corruption that has come into the national life. But you see, it's not as if God had not spoken them about this.

If you look, don't turn to this, but in Deuteronomy 17, which is essentially like the Constitution of Israel, those early books of the Bible are like the Constitution, they're the history and the rules and regulations of Israel that God set up.

[6 : 04] In Deuteronomy 17, on the appointment of judges, it says this, Do not pervert justice or show partiality. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and twists the words of the righteous.

Follow justice and justice alone so that you may live and possess the land the Lord your God is giving you. Follow justice. Do not accept bribes.

Her leaders judged for a bribe. Oh, they knew. God had spoken. He had given them His Word. And the great sin is that they have willfully rejected it.

And just as God knew how justice could become distorted by sin and by corruption, so now the prophet Micah is demonstrating just how perverted sin has made these people who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones, who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces.

This is powerful, sickening language. It's about senseless aggression. And it represents a distortion not only of natural law but of God's law. For these are the people who are supposed to take care of and lead God's people.

[7 : 20] and yet they have turned against the nation, turned against God's people. And the result of this is this terrible imagery, imagery of random bestiality.

These people are likened to animals devouring other animals, yet even devoid of instinct or purpose. For even animals have instincts, instincts for preservation or for the care of their young. But these people are presented as even lower than that. And what Micah is saying with all this horrific imagery is this. This is what you are. This is what sin has done to you.

I don't imagine that played down too well with the gallery. But you see that sin has made these people completely devoid of their humanness. And so God rejects them.

In verse 4, He is not going to rush to their side when trouble comes. You see, they have rejected God's Word written for them. And now they think they are just going to turn to God when trouble comes.

[8 : 23] But you see, you cannot live sinfully on the one hand by keeping in the back of your mind that you can just turn to God at the last minute. That isn't how it operates.

For sin has made these people detestable to God. They are leaders without justice. Second, prophets without vision.

That's no better with the religious leaders. As for the prophets who lead my people astray, if one feeds them, they proclaim peace. If he does not, they prepare to wage war against him.

Now you see, that is the degeneration of the religion that has come as the result of sin. Like the leaders, these prophets, they are not being ruled by what God has spoken, nor by the Spirit of the Lord.

They are governed by the basis of instincts. They are like animals. They are thugs. You throw some food at them and they prophesy. You pay them and they say what you want to hear. You don't pay

them. They go on the attack.

[9 : 23] These people are supposed to be the elite of the nation. And they are presented as worse than animals. It is the imagery of senseless aggression. But you can see in verses 6 and 7 what is the source of their prophetic ministry.

It is divination. Darkness without divination. The sun will go down upon the prophets. The seers will be disgraced. You see, they are just fortune tellers actually. They are not people who are operating in the Spirit of the Lord.

They are fortune tellers. And God had spoken about this again in Deuteronomy. He had forbidden this kind of prophetic ministry. In Deuteronomy 18 he says this, The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination.

But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so. A prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say. Or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods must be put to death.

You see, God had spoken clearly about the role of the prophets in society. Just as clearly as he spoke about the role of civil leaders and priests. He told them what he wanted.

[10 : 36] Prophets were to speak on God's behalf and lead the people into righteousness not to lead them astray. Because what God established when he set up Israel was a holy people.

He provided them guidance for how he wanted them to live and conduct themselves. And at the heart of it all he put a relationship. A relationship between himself and his holy people.

And so you see, the heart of sin is when people willfully turn away from God's word and distort their relationship with him.

When they willfully turn away and ignore and disregard God's word. That is the essence of sin. It is slapping God into the face saying, I know you said that but I don't care.

That is what happened in the garden of Eden. God told the man and woman that they could eat of everything in the garden except the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Along comes Satan and he says, did God really say that?

[11 : 44] Did God really mean that? But the result of one little sin of disobedience in the garden was a great spiral of sin which deformed and perverted our humanity.

There we were in the garden. We were perfect. We were glorious. We were able to relate to the living God. Then comes disobedience. Then human relations get perverted.

Adam and Eve start blaming one another. Then comes murder. Cain and Abel. A brother murders his own brother. That is how sin distorts God's creation.

It destroys our humanness. It happens when we willfully disobey God's word. And sin is a terrible illness that has befallen our souls.

Those people that Micah is addressing they were supposed to be the elite of Israel. Instead their souls are crippled and they are utterly void of humanness.

[12 : 43] But you see it's God had spoken to them. I'm learning about this with raising my children. I'm still very much a beginner parent. But we're in that kind of discipline thing now.

And what I'm learning is that there's no point in getting angry with my children if they do something that I didn't say was wrong.

How are they going to know? That's not fair, is it? So of course I have to tell them that that's wrong. And again and again and again. But by telling them what's wrong I'm giving them a standard.

I'm giving them a warning. Look, this is what you've got to do. Or this is what you ought not to do.

And that's the way it is with sin and God. It's not as if God expects us to just know automatically.

He tells us. He told his people. He's given them his word. And they have willfully disobeyed it. It's no different today. Like all societies everywhere at every time in history ours is one of moral and ethical and spiritual confusion.

[13 : 48] There is no single standard to which everyone agrees. No absolute universal law and we do not all worship the same God. But Christian brothers and sisters, we are God's people now.

We are God's holy people. And God has spoken plainly to us. We have the scriptures. They are quite clear about what God expects of us and how he operates.

And at the heart of the scriptures there is a relationship. A relationship of redemption and overpowering love established between God and his people. Established by and through Jesus Christ.

For God wants us to be in communion with him. God wants us to be glorious, perfect again. He wants us to be perfected in our communion with him.

Yet Satan comes along and says to us in the church, did God really say that? Did he mean that? Oh well we don't believe that anymore, do we?

[14:49] We're more enlightened now. That was a long time ago. But we listen to that voice at our peril. Just look at Micah. His language represents the distortion of humanness that sin affects.

The crippling of our souls. They are prophets without vision. But finally, a nation without God. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a bribe, her prophets tell fortunes for money. Yet they lean upon the Lord and say, is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us. Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field. Jerusalem will become a heap of rebel, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

Now that is the final perversion that sin has brought about. For now even salvation itself has become distorted. So that rather than being the gift of God to penitent sinners, salvation has little more than a shrug of the shoulders.

Oh well, God's going to save us. He's always there. Now the confidence of these people was in the physical fact of the temple. You see, they say, is not the Lord among us?

[16:01] Well, they've got the temple there in Jerusalem. The temple was the center of worship and it was the place where God's presence on earth dwelt. It's described as his footstool. God is resident in the temple.

But now, it's as if God was a prisoner there. There's no problem. Don't worry about it. God is with us. That is the degree to which sin had perverted the nation.

They took God utterly for granted. But Micah is warning them, listen, God cannot tolerate sin. For when we willfully collude with sin, not only does it distort us, it makes it impossible for God to deal with us.

The result of sin in Israel's history was the rejection of God. And indeed, everything Micah talks about here came true. They put their confidence in the presence of God in the temple.

But if you read in Ezekiel writing in the 6th century, he records the chilling moment when the presence of God departed from the temple. You can read that in chapter 10.

[17:06] Then the glory of the Lord departed from over the threshold of the temple. No, God was not going to hang around in the face of sin. And Micah's prophecy of the destruction of Jerusalem would finally be totally fulfilled, not only 150 years later when they went into exile, but completely in the year AD 70, when the Romans came in for the final time.

They dispersed the nation and they destroyed the temple. And it has never been rebuilt. A heap of rubble indeed. That is a nation without God.

God. For when people collude with sin in the face of God's expressed word, it's as if a state of war is set up between us and God. And so sin not only distorts us, it puts up a barrier between us and God that God cannot overcome and which God will not tolerate.

And you know, as Christians, what we need to do is be ever vigilant about being intolerant of sin within ourselves. And one of the things preparing this sermon has forced me to do is look within and examine my heart and my mind, my voice, the things I say, the things I do.

What sin am I accommodating within myself? What's different for all of us? But you see, we cannot take God for granted and claim our salvation without genuine repentance and change.

[18:38] And we cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we are growing into Christian maturity when we tolerate and accommodate sin within ourselves. And you see, that is why the church cannot deliberately embrace sin and expect God to continue to use us as his instrument upon the earth.

Now, of course, we are all sinners. That is where our faith begins. We need to start with that fact. But what we cannot do is willfully accommodate sin in our lives and fool ourselves into thinking that that is okay with God, that somehow God will continue to bless us.

For that is not how God operates. What are you tolerating in yourself? People often tolerate sinful states of mind, of anger or criticalness or self-centeredness or greed or sexual impurity. humanity, whatever it is that's unique to you. Or we excuse sinful habits on our lives, things we say, things we do. But you see, we cannot willfully engage in sinful ways of life, of thought, of word, of action, and at the same time present ourselves to God and presume upon his acceptance, for that is not how it works.

We reject God when we choose sin. sin. That's what Israel did. They became a nation without God. For when we reject God and choose sin, there is no salvation there.

[20 : 11] A nation without God. But you know, for all the bleakness of Micah chapter 3, for all the language of judgment and sin, there is a wonderful ray of hope, and it is in Micah himself.

But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, and with justice and might. For God is speaking truth through Micah, and when God speaks judgment into human history, he does so to bring about redemption.

When he rebukes, he offers a way home. And so it is that God spoke completely and utterly through Jesus Christ into human history. Jesus announced himself, I am the good shepherd.

shepherd. The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news. For God's desire is not to condemn the world, but that all humanity should be restored in the image of God.

Like King David, who heard the condemnation of his sin, but repentant. Let us hear that call to repentance and renounce sin in our lives. Let us be God's holy people and speak God's message of repentance and restoration in Jesus Christ into our society.

[21 : 28] For sin wounds and distorts us. It kills us spiritually and wrecks our ability to relate to God. But sin is not meant to have the last word. And condemnation is not God's desire.

Rather it is that all human being, all human society should be renewed, restored in the image of God. Our souls are meant to be healthy and whole.

We are meant to be glorious in communion with God. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

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