

Sin and Society

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- [0 : 00] Let's bow here to prayer. Our God and Father, we pray that your word may be our rule and guide, your Holy Spirit himself our teacher, and your great glory our supreme concern.
- In the name of Jesus Christ we ask. Amen. Amen. I wonder if you would take out the Bible that's in front of you and turn to page 817 to Micah chapter 2.
- As you do so, I just mentioned that we're going to be using small individual cups still this Sunday for communion, but health authorities have lifted their ban and so we will be taking the common cup next time we share the Lord's Supper together.
- So for those of you who are new with us, as you file forward, you will need to take a little cup and bring it to the communion rail at that time. Well now Micah is one of the favorites among the 12 minor prophets at the end of the Old Testament.
- And some of the texts remain part of the furniture of Christian imagination over the centuries. So look at chapter 6 verse 8 for a moment.
- [1 : 26] He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.
- We'll back to chapter 4 verse 3. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks.
- Nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.
- And chapter 5 verse 2 is the basis for the hymn that we sing at Christmas time, O little town of Bethlehem. But Micah is far more than a collection of happy texts.
- It is a message from God to his people, which is searingly relevant for us today. Micah prophesies in the second half of the 8th century BC, and like his contemporaries Isaiah, Hosea and Amos, he preaches to a people who have become economically strong, but spiritually weak.
- [2 : 57] The people of God have seen incredible economic and material wealth, and as is almost always the case with the people of God, the blessings of prosperity and plenty, had been accompanied by spiritual disobedience and decadence.
- And the worship of God had degenerated as a means for the fulfillment of personal goals. And as Felix pointed out from the pulpit last week, that's why chapter 1 is entirely lacking in entertainment value.
- It's a courtroom scene, where the Lord, the judge of all the earth, and all the nations of the earth, enters to announce judgment. And when a judge comes into a court, he usually stands.
- When this judge enters, the mountains melt like wax, and the earth threatens to unravel before him. When we come to chapter 2, the judge gets down to business.

We find what has driven him to this place, how he intends to deal with his people, and why he is stunningly different than any other judge we could imagine.

[4 : 08] And there are three sections in chapter 2, and I've called them the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. So let's look verses 1 to 5, at what I've called the truth.

And I've called it the truth, because in these verses, we find that the deceptive appearance of prosperity and plenty are pulled back, and the spiritual reality that lies underneath is exposed.

And the prophet uses funeral language. Verse 1, Woe to those who devise wickedness, who work evil on their beds. And the morning dawns, they perform it because it's in the power of their hand.

They covet fields and seize them. Houses take them away. They oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. Micah speaks straight to the entrepreneurs, to the new money.

And he says, What is driving the bull economy? What is oiling this easy affluence? It's not hard work in the application of sound business principles. It is one thing. It is greed.

[5 : 16] You see, covetousness brings a tremendous focus to one's life. What we do is we take the desires that God has given to us, the desires that are meant to be directed towards God, and are fulfilled only in God, and we attach them to something, or some person.

And we begin to imagine that that object, or that person, can bring the meaning and significance that we need. Greed sets up a cruel cycle in our lives.

It taps into our feelings that somehow we're going to miss out on something, unless we take things into our own hands. And it seeps into every area of our lives, particularly into our imaginations.

And I think that's the point of verse 1, where these are the kinds of things we think about as we go to sleep at night. And the more we desire, and the more we have, the more we need to desire, and in the end we find we are worshipping our desires.

And that is why the New Testament says that covetousness is idolatry. And the new money in Israel and Judah was being made in property. The quick dispossession of those who had no money to fight it.

[6 : 28] So that families were losing the land that had belonged to them since the time that God had given it to them when Israel was first settled. And whenever you read the Old Testament, and it speaks about the land of Israel, the issue is not merely injustice here, or the corrupt use of power.

It's not just the price gouging for the poor. It is the fact that the land belonged to God. Every inch of it was God's holy land.

The issue here is not about real estate. It's about the rejection of God. You see, God had created Israel as a nation for himself.

And he had rescued them from Egypt, and he had bound himself to them in covenant, as a young husband does to his bride. And he had given them his law, and he had given them his continued presence, and he had brought them into this land, and said, I will give you this land as an inheritance.

But, if you read the book of Deuteronomy, God is crystal clear that the land does not belong to them, it belongs to him. And to make that even more plain, God allots different territories to different tribes and families in which they are to live.

[7 : 49] And God warns his people that if they turn away from him, and if they go after other gods, they have no right to the land. Indeed, God promises to his people that he will evict them from the land.

And that's exactly what Micah is warning his people about here. They cannot pretend to hold the blessing of God and the gift of God without the true repentance and transformed lives.

They cannot presume on the kindness of God while rejecting him in exactly the way that we cannot pretend to hold the salvation in Christ or the gift of eternal life or the forgiveness of sins without true repentance and transformed lives.

And so God announces judgment. And I hope you notice through these verses, verses 1 to 5, that at every step, the punishment exactly fits the crime.

In verse 1, they devise evil. Verse 3, God will devise evil. Verse 2, they seize fields. Verse 4, God will remove theirs. Verse 2, they exclude the weak.

[8 : 59] They try to control others. Verse 5, they will be excluded. They will be controlled by others. And within 150 years of these words being spoken, God transferred the entire land by an act of terrible conveyance into the hands of the Assyrians because the people of God would not listen to the words of the prophet of God.

And that is the truth that lies under the surface. Secondly, the whole truth. Verses 6 to 11, over the page.

Now, no sooner does Micah finish telling them the truth, laying the truth of God before them, when like Isaiah and Hosea, he is told to shut up.

Look at verse 6. Do not preach. This is from the ecclesiastical establishment. Do not preach. Thus they preach. One should not preach of such things.

Disgrace will not overtake us. The whole idea of God's judgment was so offensive that they order Micah to stop preaching instantly.

[10 : 17] And every single one of the true prophets of God has experienced deep resistance to their preaching. And the reason for that is that God's people hate hearing the whole truth.

They want to hear half the truth. That side of the truth which is about the love of God and the acceptance of God. Just keep your finger in Micah 2 and turn left to Isaiah chapter 30 for a moment.

which is on page 624. Isaiah is preaching the same time as Micah.

Isaiah in the north, Micah in the south. Isaiah 30 verse 9. Isaiah says for they are a rebellious people lying sons sons who will not hear the instruction of the Lord who say to the seers see not and to the prophets prophesy not to us what is right.

Speak to us of smooth things. Prophecy illusions. Leave the way. Turn aside from the path. Let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel.

[11 : 42] That's stunning. To hear the people of God they do not want to hear the whole truth. They do not want to hear the supernatural message. A message that's going to make moral demands from a holy God.

They want a smooth message. A message that's not going to ruffle any feathers. A message that's going to allow them to do as they wish and continue in the deception that they are the people of God.

Every Christian preacher has to struggle with the fact that in his own heart and in the hearts of his hearers is the pervasive attitude we do not want to hear about judgment.

We do not want God we do not want to hear what God says on certain topics. Just stick to what is positive. What is uplifting.

What is encouraging. It's interesting people don't want you to stop preaching they just want your preaching to be innocuous. To not speak about actual sins.

[12 : 47] To not be too far out of step with the culture. Preaching that won't upset us. And one of the ways we see this today is the pervasive commitment to relevance.

I cannot tell you how many conferences preaching conferences I've been to where the idea is that we preach the gospel not because it's true but because it's relevant. I am not saying that preaching should be irrelevant.

But people the idea is around today that all we need to do is make people come to see the relevance of Jesus and they'll just come running. It's a fantastic naivety.

Not just because it puts me at the centre and makes me the touchstone of what is important and relevant not just because it demotes the truth of God to compete with everything else that's relevant but because it ignores the very simple fact that the gospel is relevant because it is true.

He looked down at chapter 2 verse 11 in Micah. He's speaking about the preachers here. He says if a man should go about and utter wind and lies covers all preachers saying I will preach to you of wine and strong drink he would be the preacher for this people.

[14 : 06] Isn't that wonderful? See what people want all the time you included me included is entertainment. We want to hear what makes us feel good and when we do we drink it in.

We don't want to hear about the wrath of God or the reality of judgment. We want the intoxication of clever words or erudite speech or creative ideas. We swallow it every time.

Look at chapter 3 verse 11 Micah is speaking about his people he says its heads give judgment for a bribe its priests teach for hire its prophets divine for money yet they lean upon the Lord and they say is not the Lord in the midst of us no evil shall come upon us.

See this is where the spirit of the age reveals itself every time. It is in the demolition and the demotion and the denial of judgment presuming upon the grace of God.

This has been Satan's strategy ever since the garden. If he can get us to turn away from judgment to not believe in judgment he is halfway home his strategy is always to be in cast dispersion on doubt on the fact that God either has the right or the courage to judge us.

[15 : 23] And you can tell the voice of the false prophet and the false teacher because they say peace peace when there is no peace. Or as Jeremiah later says they say it shall be well with you no evil shall come upon you.

the official ecclesiastical authorities of Micah's day do their best to pull Micah's license. They are fiercely intolerant of a message that Celis says not all is well.

They despise a message that God will judge those who do not honour him and do not turn from their sin. You see I don't know if you've ever asked yourself this question why is it that in the Old Testament God sends prophet after prophet after prophet with a word of judgment?

Why is it that every letter in the New Testament warns us that Jesus Christ is coming as the judge of the living and the dead? Why is it that Jesus Christ more than anyone else in scripture warns us of the reality of the judgment and of hell?

It's not fear mongering. It's not manipulation. It is because God very much desires that we face up to the whole truth.

[16 : 43] And if you look in verse 7 you get a fascinating insight into the way in which the false teachers got their message out. They say should this be said O house of Jacob is the spirit of the Lord impatient?

That is a quote from the book of Exodus. What they're saying is this. Micah God is not impatient. As you make him out to be. He is endlessly patient.

Do you not remember how in Exodus 34 when God revealed himself to Moses he says the Lord the Lord a God merciful and gracious slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Does not God accept us just as we are? They said. There is no condemnation in God only acceptance. God's forgiving love will include any belief and any behaviour.

They said. God does not require ongoing repentance and forgiveness and transformation of life. They said. But that is not the whole truth.

[17 : 49] For even if you go back to that verse in Exodus 34 in the very next verse God says I will by no means clear the guilty. I will visit the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and fourth generation.

See God's promise of salvation and forgiveness and eternal life are for those who turn from their sins and place their faith in Jesus Christ. You cannot separate them. The pervasive understanding of the gospel in the Anglican Church of Canada over the last 20 to 30 years is that it is all and only about the love of God.

That all we need to do is to assure people that God is love and they will come flocking. But what has happened? For decades as we've preached the love of God, the love of God and smooth words we've lost 20,000 members a year.

But so deeply are we convinced that disgrace will not overtake us, that now we think we can bless what God calls sin, saying it shall be well with you, no evil shall come upon you.

And what is the result of the ministry of the false prophets? Do they bring renewal and revival? Does the message of love without holiness, of salvation without judgment, of acceptance without repentance bring a single person to God?

[19 : 17] God? No, it did not. It never did. It never will. Instead it lays waste the people of God.

And you see the effects in verses 8 and 9. It makes the preachers the enemies of God's people. And just when you feel that it is time to despair, Micah turns from the half-truth to the whole truth, to nothing but the truth in verses 12 to 13.

Never too soon. God says, I will surely gather all of you, O Jacob. I will gather the remnant of Israel.

I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in its pasture, a noisy multitude. He who opens the breach will go up before them.

They will break through and pass through the gate, going out by it. Their king will pass on them before them. The Lord is at their head. Micah wants us to know that God remains committed to his steadfast love, but it is a steadfast love unlike any we encounter in this world, unlike the idols that we create.

[20 : 36] It is a holy love that yearns for us and acts to save us and brings us into the place of blessing and sanctuary. Because disaster and judgment are not God's final word.

When everything seems lost from a human point of view, God comes in to seek and to save those who are lost and those who are utterly lost. And he puts himself forward as our hope and our salvation in these final two verses in this chapter with two beautiful pictures.

And the first is he calls himself our shepherd in verse 12. You see, the effect of our commitment to greed and our commitment to our idolatries is that we build high walls around ourselves, barriers that cannot be taken down.

And we divide and we separate and we isolate ourselves from one another. And the good shepherd comes to us and does exactly the opposite. it. Twice in that verse he draws us together.

I will gather all of you. I will gather you, he says. Not just for the sake of gathering, but he says, I will set you together like sheep in a fold, flock in a pasture, a noisy pasture by the looks of things.

[21 : 54] It's a picture of safety and stillness and security and delight. It's the picture from the Psalms of shelter and life. He gathers us into his fold.

He makes us lie down in green pastures. He leads us beside the still waters into the field where we will feed on the living food. He restores our soul.

And how does he do that as we stand under his judgment? The answer is in verse 13. He is not just a shepherd, but he is a shepherd king. And if you look at the phrases in that verse, you can see that God sees the separation and the barriers and the walls that we set up and we're powerless to take down and he smashes his way through them and passes on by.

He opens a door and leads us out, becoming the solution and the salvation for the disaster that we create by our sins. And I think it is these verses that Jesus had in mind in John 10.

And I wonder if we can just as we conclude, turn over to the New Testament and see this. In John chapter 10, which is on page 98, I've often wondered why when Jesus is talking about himself being the good shepherd, he also calls himself the door.

[23 : 22] I think it's because he is meditating on Micah. John chapter 10, verse 7 to 11. So Jesus again said to them, truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.

All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not heed them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

I am the beautiful shepherd, he says. And he lays down his life and in laying down his life, he opens the door. In his death, he creates a way through our sin and he becomes the way so that all who trust in him and all who follow him can say, we will not perish, but we will have eternal life.

That he will raise us up at the last day. And there is now, therefore, no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ Jesus. We live in a culture that worships smooth words.

[24 : 45] And it is nice to hear half truths that entertain, isn't it? But what they do is they suck the spiritual life out of us and they create a breeding ground for covetousness and idolatry.

When the whole truth is not loved and not told, when the truth of God is not just marginalized as an irritant, but becomes a definite social liability and dangerous to speak.

The thing is, you see, God doesn't always say what we want him to say, but he always says what we need and he always tells us the truth. And it is by hearing his voice and believing his words and receiving them into our souls that we are saved.

Look back at the first paragraph in John 10. In verse 3 in the second half, Jesus says these words. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

And when he has brought out all his own, he goes before them and the sheep follow him for they know his voice. This is what it means to be part of his flock. We hear his voice calling us by name and we follow him.

[26 : 06] Do you hear him calling you by name? Speaking the words of truth and life, he is calling each of us. And he has laid down his life and he opens the door and we need to answer him, hear him and answer him.

We need to follow him and enter in. And there we will find pasture. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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