

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Ancient Guides for Troubled Times **(studies in the Minor Prophets)**

God Cuts to the Chase (the prophecy of Micah)

Study #4

Introduction: The profit of a prophet...

As I mentioned when I began to speak from the Minor Prophets about four weeks ago, I have come to love the prophetic books of the Old Testament. I hope that after having looked at Habakkuk, Hosea, and Haggai you are coming to love them, too!¹

Prior to spending time in the prophetic books, you might have been under the impression that every page of a prophetic book has a sensational message about end-times events or that the prophet is mostly concerned to tell us how the world will end - or that he is at least going to help us fill in our prophecy charts.

Clearly, that is NOT what they are all about!

While the prophets do sometimes tell what will happen in the near or far distant future, predicting the future was really not their primary role.

¹ In fact, having looked at a few of the Minor Prophets, my plan is to next introduce you to Jeremiah! Jeremiah is one of Scripture's towering figures who, along with Isaiah and Ezekiel is referred to as a Major Prophet. The book of Jeremiah is **rich** and you are going to really love getting to know the man as we look at some of the key events of his life beginning in October.

What prophets are all about is speaking TO people FOR God. Prophets give God's Word to people.²

An overview of the roughly four hundred pages of the prophetic material of the Old Testament will reveal that the prophets mostly were intent on calling God's people to live as the redeemed people they were.

The profit of a prophet for us is that he gives us God's mind. And that gift can take a variety of forms - gentle comfort, prediction of the future, call to action, or a stinging rebuke.

This morning we are going to meet the prophet Micah. And Micah has it all.

Meet Micah!

His book contains some of the sweetest encouragements and promises AND some of the wildest predictions of the future AND some of the harshest indictments of God's people found anywhere in the Bible.

He predicts the birth of a King to be born in Bethlehem, and we read these words every year at Christmas time.

Christmas images

***[5:2] But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
Too little to be among the clans of Judah,
From you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel.
His goings forth are from long ago,
From the days of eternity.***

He predicts a coming day of worldwide peace that today is emblazoned on United Nations banners.³

² Priests, by way of contrast, speak TO God ON BEHALF OF men and women.

³ Never mind that the United Nations is not exactly looking for Jesus to set up His Millennial reign...

Jesus' peaceful future reign

***[4:3]...THEN THEY WILL HAMMER THEIR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES
AND THEIR SPEARS INTO PRUNING HOOKS;
NATION WILL NOT LIFT UP SWORD AGAINST NATION,
AND NEVER AGAIN WILL THEY TRAIN FOR WAR.***

That verse (and others in Micah) is concerned with a period of time we refer to as the Millennium, a one thousand year reign of Christ over the earth as its righteous Judge. Today, though, we are not considering the Millennium.

This morning we are going to listen to what Micah had to say to the people of God in His own day. And when he cuts to the chase and reveals what God required of them, we'll see that it is what He requires of us, too.

Prophet to the southern Kingdom

The prophet Micah lived in the 8th century BC.⁴ Bible scholars believe that he wrote his book sometime around the year 725 BC, which is just before the fall of the northern kingdom to Assyria.⁵

But Micah was a prophet to the southern Kingdom of Judah. He was a resident of Judah,⁶ and his message was to them.⁷

The book begins with a time stamp, telling us that Micah prophesied ***[I]... in the days of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah...***⁸

⁴ Micah prophesied about the same time as Isaiah, who also ministered in the south (they likely knew each other well) and was a contemporary of Hosea, who prophesied in the north.

⁵ That is important because some of what he writes about has to do with the fall of Israel, the northern kingdom.

⁶ Came from a small city 20 miles SW of Jerusalem, Moreshath-gath.

⁷ His name means, "Like unto the Lord" and implies a question, "*Who is like the Lord?*" Answer? There is no one like the God of the Jews! Micah wore his name as an announcement everywhere he went, all his life. He self-defined as someone who called people back to fidelity to the one true God.

⁸ At no point is there an indictment against the King of Judah in Micah's book. This may be because the King was Hezekiah, a very good King.

Right off the bat, he gives us a frightening picture of the coming judgment of God.

Judgment from God on the People of God

Judgment is Coming - to Israel in the North (chapter 1)⁹

***[1:2] Hear, O peoples, all of you;
Listen, O earth and all it contains,
And let the Lord GOD be a witness against you,
The Lord from His holy temple.
[3] For behold, the LORD is coming forth from His place.
He will come down and tread on the high places of the earth.
[4] The mountains will melt under Him,
And the valleys will be split,
Like wax before the fire,
Like water poured down a steep place.***

We read these words and wonder what poor nation is going to fall under this terrible judgment? The neighboring Moabites or Ammonites? Assyria or Babylon? Iraq? North Korea? No!

***[5] All this is for the rebellion of JACOB
And for the sins of the house of ISRAEL.
What is the rebellion of Jacob?
Is it not Samaria?***

Micah's words are a description of God's judgment, a judgment that will be executed against God's own people. "Samaria" refers to the north.

Micah pictures the invasion by the Assyrians, still some years away as of his prophecy. But sure enough, in 722 BC, the Assyrian horde, led by King Shalmaneser, did come barreling across the Fertile Crescent and swooped down on Israel, destroying everything in its path.

Micah pictures all of this calamity - this judgment - coming on Israel, the northern kingdom.

⁹ The historical event pictured here is Shalmaneser's destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC.

As Micah prophecies - and remember, he is speaking TO and IN the south - the southern Kingdom was likely cheering God on. “*You go, God! Get those northerners!*”

But then, as they continued to speak, they became really, really uncomfortable. Turns out Micah wasn’t quite finished with his prophecy...

Judgment is Coming - to Judah in the South (1:9, 16)¹⁰

***[9] For her wound is incurable,
For it has come to JUDAH;
It has reached the gate of my people,
Even to JERUSALEM...***

Still in the first chapter, Micah says that Judah will share Israel’s fate!

Samaria and Jerusalem are to be companions in judgment, and much of the first chapter of Micah’s book consists of a listing of cities that will be destroyed.

The destruction travels south from Samaria, through hill country towns on its way to Jerusalem. (To imagine the impact of such a prophecy, just substitute *Dallas* for Samaria, *Johnson City* and *Blanco* for the hill country towns he mentions, and *San Antonio* for Jerusalem!)¹¹

God is pulling back the curtain of the future so that Micah can see the actual historical event of the invasion by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon, a century and a half away! He even predicts the Jewish people’s exile into captivity.

***[1:16] Make yourself bald and cut off your hair,
Because of the children of your delight;
Extend your baldness like the eagle,
FOR THEY WILL GO FROM YOU INTO EXILE.”***

¹⁰ The historical event pictured here is the invasion by Nebuchadnezzar.

¹¹ Twelve cities of Judah are mentioned. There is a word play with each one of them in which the name of the city indicates either the reason for their destruction or the manner of its demise.

That seventy year period of exile was coming to Judah and, according to Micah, it was unavoidable. Why? He tells us...

Judgment is Coming - Complete and Unavoidable! (6:13)

***[6:13] So also I will make you sick, striking you down,
Desolating you BECAUSE OF YOUR SINS.***

At various points in his book, Micah predicts a day when God will put Judah under discipline, will take away her horses and chariots, will cut off cities, will remove her wealth. He will give her up for destruction. He will send famine, sickness, and sword. Harvests will fail.

In chapter 7, Micah himself pictures himself as a farmer, out to collect grapes. He finds nothing on the vine! He compares Judah to a picked orchard and a gleaned field and a harvested vineyard. Empty, barren and desolate. That is her fate!

Thoughtful readers will wonder why God is bringing such devastation against His own people? Micah tells us. Simply put, it is the people’s **passionate pursuit of SIN** that will lead to judgment. How passionate was their pursuit of sin? Well, consider...

The Sins That Lead To Judgment

Preoccupied with Evil (2:1-2)

This afternoon, I’m boarding a plane with my son, Ben, to join my other son, Zach, in Denver. Tomorrow morning we will launch a week-long backpacking trip in the northern Rockies.

To say I am eager for this trip would be an embarrassing understatement. I’ve consulted maps, stuffed, un-stuffed and re-stuffed my backpack numerous times, thought through my menu and fiddled with our trip itinerary on the trail.

I’ve been planning this trip for weeks - yea, months! Kind of like the way our children would behave on the night before Kathy and I would take them on an overnight campout or for a day at a state park when they were young. (Yes, I’ve been acting like a six year old.)

The first words of chapter two indicate how deeply ingrained is the people of Israel's inclination toward sin.

***[2:1] Woe to those who scheme iniquity,
Who work out evil on their beds!
When morning comes, they do it,
For it is in the power of their hands.***

How excited were the Jews of Micah's day to transgress the Law of God? They lost sleep over it! "*Man, what evil can I do tomorrow?*"

"*I know*" they would think to themselves,
***[2] They covet fields and then seize them,
And houses, and take them away.
They rob a man and his house,
A man and his inheritance.***

Judah's morality is summarized in Micah's sixth chapter, when Micah says that they follow the statues of Omri (6:16).

Here is a description of Omri, one of the kings of the northern kingdom of Israel, ***[1 Kings 16:25] And Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, and acted more wickedly than all who were before him.***

Pretty bad, huh? Well Omri had a son - Ahab.

[1 Kings 16:30] And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him.¹²

Micah says that the people have come to love evil the way the wicked king, Omri, did. NO - more than that - the way AHAB did! Wow!!

They have bought into the idea that "might makes right"¹³ They do evil because they CAN! The people have become so adept at wickedness, they can sin equally well with right or left hand. They are ambidextrous sinners! (7:3)

What were they doing that was so bad, you ask? Glad you asked.

Sins Against Their Fellow Man

Abusing the vulnerable (2:8)

***[2:8] Recently My people have arisen as an enemy--
You strip the robe off the garment,
From unsuspecting passers-by,
From those returned from war.***

People aren't safe on the road. Gangs brutalize the vulnerable. Robbers station themselves on the highways and set ambushes. The innocent are at risk any time they go out of doors.

Sins against women, children (2:9)

A prime indicator of the health of any civilization is its treatment of women. You'll remember what our news media reported about women's right under the Taliban when we were going to war in 2001. You will also remember the difficult challenges women face in Morocco, as reported by the team that went from our church this past summer.

Well, modern-day Middle-eastern fundamentalist Muslim regimes have nothing on 8th century BC Judah.

***[2:9] The women of My people you evict,
Each one from her pleasant house.
From her children you take My splendor forever.***

Women are abused and so are helpless children.

The prophet goes on to paint a hideous image of the behavior of governmental rulers in Judah in the first verses of chapter 3.

Rulers rule with cruelty (3:1-4)

***[3:1] And I said,
"Hear now, heads of Jacob
And rulers of the house of Israel...
[2] You who hate good and love evil,
Who tear off their skin from them
And their flesh from their bones,***

¹² See 1 Kings 18 and 21.

¹³ A belief held by Ahab - see the story of Naboth's Vineyard. (1 Kings 21).

***[3] And who eat the flesh of my people,
Strip off their skin from them,
Break their bones,
And chop them up as for the pot
And as meat in a kettle.”***

It’s grotesque language, but Micah makes the point that the rulers are perverting justice.

The city councilmen of Jerusalem are wasting the tithes (i.e. - taxes) of its citizens. They are lording it over the populace. They come down with cruel judgments.¹⁴

And there is more.

As Micah addresses the religious leaders later in chapter 3, there is one dominating theme in all the rebukes he gives to the priests, scribes, prophets, pastors, elders, deacons, and ministry coordinators of his day. See if you can pick it out.

Religious elite are after money (3:5, 11)

***[3:5] Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets
Who lead my people astray;
WHEN THEY HAVE SOMETHING TO BITE WITH THEIR TEETH,
THEY CRY, “PEACE,”
BUT AGAINST HIM WHO PUTS NOTHING IN THEIR MOUTHS,
THEY DECLARE HOLY WAR.
[3:11] Her leaders pronounce judgment for a bribe,
Her priests instruct for a price,
And her prophets divine for money.
Yet they lean on the LORD saying, “Is not the LORD in our midst?
Calamity will not come upon us.”***

Did you catch it?

- Need a favorable ruling in a court case? *Payola* will get it for you.

¹⁴ That is why, when they cry out to God in the day of God’s judgment, He will turn a deaf ear to them. (See Micah 3:4)

- Give a prophet a good meal and he’ll declare peace for you. Fail to offer him a steak dinner and he’ll threaten holy war. He’ll tell your fortune if you grease his palm.¹⁵
- Priests, who were supported by the tithe from the people, are teaching Bible studies - for a price.

These guys are in it for the money! They are in it for what they can get out of it. The leaders are all controlled by a creed of greed.

The last specific sin against fellow men I’ll mention that is listed by Micah (it’s not the last one he mentions!) is found in chapter 6.

Inaccurate scales (6:11-12)

In verses 11 and 12, he mentions violence, lies and deceit. All serious sins. But he tells us, too, about “wicked scales” and “deceptive weights.” What’s that all about?

***[6:11] Can I justify wicked scales
And a bag of deceptive weights?***

There is a painting by a famous American artist, Leslie Thrasher, of a woman in a butcher shop. She is weighing a turkey on a scale. We can see, though, what neither the butcher nor the woman can see.

The butcher has his thumb pressed down on the scale and the woman is pressing up on the scale as they both look at the scale’s needle.¹⁶

It’s a cute picture. We smile at it because both the woman and the butcher think they are getting a great deal. But, it’s not REALLY funny (except for the fact that neither is gaining an advantage!). And it’s not funny because what is at stake is integrity.

This is what was going on in Jerusalem, and it is what is referred to by the words “*wicked scales*” and “*deceptive weights*.”

God doesn’t think it is cute when someone gets cheated, when the poor are exploited.

¹⁵ Prophets hired themselves out like Balaam did.

¹⁶ This painting is often erroneously attributed to Norman Rockwell.

Every once in a while we'll hear reports of a gas station adjusting the flow rate on its pumps to its advantage. Customers are paying a gallon's price for eight tenths of a gallon. That's not funny.

In Jerusalem, scales are out of balance. There is overcharging and price gouging. It is economic injustice! And these were just some of the practices that were behind the Lord's decision that judgment that due.

Then, in addition to the sins being committed on a human level, the way that the people were dealing with God formed a huge part of the basis for the coming judgment.

Let's read backwards through Micah 6:3-5.

Sins Against God (6:3-5)

Note God's deliverance from Balaam!

***[6:5] My people, remember now
What Balak king of Moab counseled
And what Balaam son of Beor answered him,
And from Shittim to Gilgal,
In order that you might know the righteous acts of the LORD.***

The Lord reminds the people of His provision for them during their long history.

One story worth telling is the story of how He protected them from the counsel of Balaam during their wilderness wanderings. Tremendous story, found in Numbers. He didn't allow Balaam to curse Israel.

He continues in the previous verse.

Note God's deliverance from Egypt!

***[6:4] Indeed, I brought you up from the land of Egypt
And ransomed you from the house of slavery,
And I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam.***

He reminds them of the deliverance He provided from Egypt. It is called here a "ransom." The reference to Egypt brings to mind the awful plagues sent to convince Pharaoh to let the people go, and the parting of the Red Sea and the gift of the Law.

Now, listen to verse three.

Yet, Israel is BORED by God!!

***[6:3] My people, what have I done to you,
And how have I wearied you? Answer Me.***

"Oh, I'm sorry - am I boring you? Have I offended you? Is there some reason you are not giving Me My due when it comes to heartfelt worship, service, adoration, and praise?"

Consider the arrogance of appearing weary in the presence of God. They consider what He has done for them - and yawn in His face!

"Yeah, we know You did all that stuff in the past. But what have You done for us LATELY? Is that - the Exodus and stuff - all You are going to do for us?"

As bad as their idolatries were (and they were bad!), it is this lackadaisical indifference to the mercies God has shown them that pushed Him over the edge and guaranteed judgment!

We asked earlier, "*Why is judgment coming?*" The answer is clear. It is because of Israel's misbehavior. They have committed a whole laundry list of sins, both against each other and against their God. They haven't lived as they were redeemed to live.

And how, exactly, were they to have ordered their lives? Our memory verse for the month of September says it all.

And What Does The Lord Require Of You? (6:8)

The Lord's Requirement THEN

*[6:8] He has told 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?"*

The mandate is introduced by a question. What does God require?

- Does He want sacrifice and burnt offerings?
- Regular church attendance?
- Not drive an SUV?
- Give generously?
- Vote Republican? Democrat? Independent?

None of these things are what God requires, yet He does require nothing other than: (1). Do justice; (2). Love kindness; (3). Walk humbly with God.

Notice. Everything Judah did that led to her judgment violated either her call to do justice, her call to love kindness, or her call to walk humbly with God.

And notice again. These requirements are precisely what the Lord Jesus calls us to in what we refer to as "The Great Commandment"?

In Mark 12:30, Jesus was asked what He considered to be the greatest commandment God ever gave. He replied,

*[12:30] and you shall LOVE THE Lord YOUR God WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND, AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.
[31] The second is this, You shall LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF. There is no other commandment greater than these.*

Sounds like Micah 6:8 - only in reverse!

What we're seeing today is that God's requirements for the way He wants His children to live haven't changed much through the ages.

Some particulars have certainly changed for the Jew of the Old Testament vs. the Christian of 2009. But, the big stuff is the same.

When God cuts to the chase and gets down to brass tacks and lays out the bottom line, we, just like the Jews of Micah's day, are to seek the best for those in our world (**do justice, love kindness**) and we are to worship and love the Lord (**walk humbly with God**).

Who ever said the Christian life was complicated? Nothing complicated about that, is there?

If we are going to live as our Lord requires, we will love. Or, as Micah says it, we'll pursue justice and kindness.

The Lord's Requirement NOW

Love: Justice and Kindness in 2009

When you or I think "justice," we may first think of the role of government - and that is understandable. On a macro-scale, justice falls in the lap of our governing authorities.¹⁷

But each of us here today is called by God to "**do justice**" on a micro-scale. That would be person-to-person. With fellow classmates. Neighbor to neighbor. With co-workers. In our homes.

To do justice is to keep our word. It is to tell the truth. It is to be a person of integrity. It is to follow through on commitments. It is to live a life of open transparency and vulnerability.

¹⁷ And some of you here today could be extremely effective in working for justice. You could actually affect public policy changes that would work more effectively for "justice for all" in the society in which we live. And it is a loving thing when people receive justice. You could write letters to representative in congress, to judges, to public policy makers. Some of you might seek to intervene on an international level for injustices suffered abroad. Human rights violations are rampant in many countries around the world today. Your eloquent, reasoned voice, your passionate appeals, your alternative solutions might be the tools God uses to bring an end to some ugly abuses.

Think of the closest relationships you enjoy in life. If you are married, your spouse. Think of your parents or your children, your siblings and close friends.

How great an impact would it make in these relationships if you always told the truth and never told a lie, were open and transparent, kept your word, and followed through on commitments you have made?

My suspicion is that if we did these things, our relationships would be transformed and deepened and God would be honored. It is just to live this way.

The exercise of KINDNESS in 2009

And then there is kindness. I like to think of kindness as the fine art of serving people who are especially vulnerable to unkindness.

It is kind to visit people who are sick, sad, or in trouble. It is kind to help people who “have not.”

More personally, the kind wife grants forgiveness to her husband after he has sinned and asks for another chance. The kind husband goes out of his way to support his wife when she has failed him. The kind friend goes above and beyond the call of duty to do a favor or to meet a need.

Micah, in the Old Testament, tells us plainly that we are to *love* kindness. The New Testament adds color to that picture and says that we should *love* acting kindly because we have been shown great kindness by God.

Paul writes, *[Titus 3:4] But when the KINDNESS of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared, [5] He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy...*

Since we have been treated so kindly by the God who saved us, we are to run toward others in kindness!

Worship: A HUMBLE WALK WITH GOD in 2009

And finally, Micah calls us to a humble walk with God. God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, sovereign over all and the Redeemer of our eternal souls.

Micah calls us to the walk humbly with this awesome God. We have embarked on a long walk with God. This walk began the moment we entered into a relationship with Him through faith in Jesus.

This is not a walk between peers. He is leading the way on this walk. We follow Him. Wherever He leads, we follow.

Over mountain tops or through deep gorges. Through sun-drenched meadows or across deserts. Through the storm and through the valley of the shadow of death, we follow. We know our place. He is God and we are not.

This is what the Lord requires.

Now, what do you do if you see what the Lord requires of you and have to admit that you have been UNJUST in your dealings with people, have been UNKIND, and have NOT WALKED HUMBLY WITH YOUR GOD?

To all who are failing or who have failed, Micah says, “*Tashlich!*”

Conclusion: Tashlich!

*[7:19] He will again have compassion on us;
He will tread our iniquities under foot.
Yes, You will cast all their sins
Into the depths of the sea.*

On the first day of the Jewish year (Rosh Hashanah), Jews today still carry out the tradition of “Tashlich.”

They read these words from Micah and then empty their pockets, casting the contents (usually bread crumbs) into a body of water.

This act represents getting rid of the baggage of sin and reflects the thoughts found in Micah's final words. God casts our sins into the depths of the sea and posts a sign that says, "*No Fishing!*"

This special service is called "Tashlich." (from the Hebrew "You will cast/throw").

Brothers and sisters, Jesus invites you to empty your pockets today. Cast your sins on Jesus. Confess your failings to love and to worship as you have been called to love and worship and you will find forgiveness.

He will restore. He will re-energize.

And, then, with fullest confidence that you are CLEAN in God's sight, you can begin again to deal in **justice** and **kindness** with others in your world and to **walk with God in humility**.

THIS (Micah 6:8) is the life you were created and saved to live!!

*He has told 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?*
(Micah 6:8)