

March 22 Lesson 4 (NIV)

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST CORRUPTION

DEVOTIONAL READING: Zechariah 7:8–10; Deuteronomy 24:17–22

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Micah 3–6

MICAH 3:1–3, 9–12

¹ Then I said,

“Listen, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel.

Should you not embrace justice,

² you who hate good and love evil;
who tear the skin from my people
and the flesh from their bones;

³ who eat my people’s flesh,
strip off their skin
and break their bones in pieces;
who chop them up like meat for the pan,
like flesh for the pot?”

.....
⁹ Hear this, you leaders of Jacob,
you rulers of Israel,

who despise justice
and distort all that is right;

¹⁰ who build Zion with bloodshed,
and Jerusalem with wickedness.

¹¹ Her leaders judge for a bribe,
her priests teach for a price,
and her prophets tell fortunes for money.

Yet they look for the LORD’s support and say,
“Is not the LORD among us?
No disaster will come upon us.”

¹² Therefore because of you,
Zion will be plowed like a field,
Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

MICAH 6:6–8

**⁶ With what shall I come before the LORD
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?**

**⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?**

**⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.**

KEY VERSE

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. —Micah 6:8

JUSTICE AND THE PROPHETS

Unit 1: God Requires Justice

LESSONS 1–5

LESSON OUTLINE

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 - Cannibalism*
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 - B. Greedy Leaders (vv. 10, 11a)
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- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

HOW TO SAY IT

Ahaz *Ay-haz*.

Babylonians *Bab-ih-low-nee-unz*.

Hezekiah *Hez-ih-kye-uh*.

Jotham *Jo-thum*.

Micah *My-kuh*.

Samaria *Suh-mare-ee-uh*.

Uzziah *Uh-zye-uh*.

Introduction

A. Warped

A certain funeral home sets up a nativity scene on its front lawn each Christmas season. One year, someone vandalized the nativity set. The perpetrator stole the Christ-child figure and replaced it with a stuffed monkey. The vandal also broke off the fingers of other figures and let the live sheep, goats, and donkeys out of the fenced area.

A few days later, the vandal confessed and returned the stolen figure of the baby Jesus. Even so, one can empathize with the funeral director's frustration when he said, "Why people would come here and show such disrespect, I don't know. You have to have a warped mind to do something like this."

The prophet Micah indicted the leaders of his day for their own brand of vandalism. But Micah described how real people were being abused and mistreated by those responsible for their care. They too were guilty of having warped minds. And such minds tend to excel at hiding behind warped self-justification.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Micah is another of the 12 Minor Prophets. Micah's ministry took place in the second half of the eighth century BC. His times were full of turmoil and uncertainty for both Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah (the southern kingdom). The Assyrians were a formidable threat to both kingdoms. They were the instrument in God's hands to carry out his judgment against Israel when the capital city of Samaria fell in 722 BC.

Micah's ministry may have overlapped with that of Amos (see lesson 1). While the ministry of the latter is dated during the reign of Uzziah king of Judah (about 785–734 BC; Amos 1:1), Micah 1:1 describes Micah's ministry as occurring during the reigns of Jotham (Uzziah's son), Jotham's son Ahaz, and Jotham's grandson Hezekiah. Jotham's reign, however, overlapped Uzziah's. While Uzziah was confined during the latter years of his reign, Jotham ruled in his stead (2 Chronicles 26:16–23).

Micah and Isaiah were contemporaries (compare the lists of kings in Isaiah 1:1 and Micah 1:1). Both ministered in Jerusalem. Micah's message included words of judgment against both Israel and Judah. His book begins with a reference to Samaria and Jerusalem, representing Israel and Judah respectively (1:1). Both are indicted for rebellion against the Lord (1:5–9).

I. Hateful Leadership (MICAH 3:1–3)

In Micah 3, the source of today's study, we see language reminiscent of that found in the previous study from Habakkuk 2 (see lesson 3). Habakkuk, however, was describing the conduct of the foreign Babylonians. Sadly, Micah is describing the behavior of those who are part of God's covenant people and should know better.

A. Despising Principles (vv. 1, 2a)

1. Then I said, “Listen you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel. Should you not embrace justice,

The Hebrew word translated *listen* often introduces prophecy in the book of Micah (examples: Micah 1:2; 3:1, 9; 6:1, 2; contrast “obeyed” in 5:15). The same word introduces Deuteronomy 6:4, 5, which Jesus will call “the first and greatest commandment” (Matthew 22:38). The implication of its use is not just that ears will hear but that hearts will comprehend the words and lives will change as a result (contrast Isaiah 6:9, 10).

The designations *Jacob* and *Israel* refer historically to one man who had his name changed (Genesis 32:28; 46:2). As here, the names are often paired in Hebrew poetry as parallel expressions that refer to the same thing: God's covenant people (examples: Psalm 14:7; Isaiah 9:8). Similarly, *leaders* and *rulers* both refer to the same group of people (see Numbers 1:16; Joshua 22:30).

Micah begins his address to the leaders with a rhetorical question about their knowledge of *justice*. The question implies that leaders ought to know what true justice is and how to exercise it faithfully and consistently (see commentary on Micah 3:9; Amos 5:24 in lesson 1).

Justice requires God's people to behave according to his righteous standards (contrast Jeremiah 5:5; Matthew 23:23). Exercising justice reflects a person's awareness of God's standards of right and wrong (example: Leviticus 19:15).

2a. “you who hate good and love evil;

The leaders' hatred for *good* and *love* for *evil* makes it impossible for them to administer proper justice. Their moral compass points in the wrong direction. Both Isaiah (in Judah) and Amos (in Israel) address this perversion of values at about the same time (Isaiah 5:20; Amos 5:14, 15). Both northern and southern kingdoms are guilty of rejecting the Lord's standards.

B. Consuming People (vv. 2b, 3)

2b. “who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones;

Micah uses graphic language in portraying how offensive and destructive the leaders' behavior is (compare Psalm 53:4; Ezekiel 22:27). But this is only the beginning of his shocking description.

One should understand that these gruesome actions are not happening in a literal, physical sense. There are references to and predictions of literal cannibalism in the Bible (example: 2 Kings

6:26–29), but this is not one of them. Rather, Micah uses figurative, symbolic language to illustrate the extreme degree to which these leaders hate the good and love the evil (compare Psalm 14:4; Proverbs 30:14; Zephaniah 3:3). They are so indifferent to the people they are meant to serve that they can be compared to butchers.

3. “who eat my people’s flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot?”

Micah continues building on the cannibalistic overtone of the previous verse. For the leaders to *strip off* the people’s *skin* implies excessively cruel treatment. The leaders are meant to administer justice and uphold righteousness. Doing so would allow the people to flourish, both physically and spiritually. Instead, the leaders do the opposite by perverting justice and thwarting righteousness. Ezekiel, whose ministry will take place more than a century later among the captives in Babylon, uses similar language (Ezekiel 11:2–7; 24:3–6).

Centuries later, Jesus will describe the leaders’ greediness when he speaks of how the teachers of the law “devour widows’ houses” (Luke 20:46, 47). Paul in turn warns Christians against our own type of cannibalism in Galatians 5:15.

II. Hypocritical Leadership (MICAH 3:9–12)

In Micah 3:4–8 (not in today’s lesson), the prophet declares the Lord’s judgment on the leaders (compare Deuteronomy 1:45). Then Micah exposes false prophets (Micah 3:5–7; compare Isaiah 29:10). Micah contrasts their selfish motives with the divine authority that undergirds his own prophetic ministry (Micah 3:8). This sets the stage for further condemnation, next.

A. Guilty Leaders (v. 9)

9. Hear this, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel, who despise justice and distort all that is right;

Micah again calls on the *leaders* and *rulers* of God’s people to *hear* his message. But whereas in Micah 3:1 the prophet posed a rhetorical question to challenge the leaders in the matter of justice, here he bluntly accuses them of unjust behavior. They actually *despise justice* and twist the meaning of it to suit their own selfish purposes (compare Psalm 58:1, 2; Isaiah 1:23).

B. Greedy Leaders (vv. 10, 11a)

10. who build Zion with bloodshed, and Jerusalem with wickedness.

The final three verses of Micah 3 clearly focus on the southern kingdom of Judah and its capital city, *Jerusalem*. Though *Zion* was originally a specific location within Jerusalem, it gradually came to refer to the entire city. The two terms are therefore used together in parallel accusations against the city. Habakkuk indicted the Babylonians for building *with bloodshed, and ... wickedness* (Habakkuk 2:12; see lesson 3). Here it is not the pagans but the leaders of God’s covenant people who are charged with cruelty (compare Isaiah 59:7).

The implication, like that of the butchering image before, is that the leaders are taking advantage of the people for their own gain (compare Jeremiah 22:13, 17; Micah 7:2).

11a. Her leaders judge for a bribe, her priests teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money.

Three crucial leadership functions are listed here along with transgressions. When the Lord established the function of *judge*, he made it clear that those exercising this responsibility must never accept bribes or exhibit favoritism in their decisions (see Leviticus 19:15; Deuteronomy 16:18–20). The *leaders* in Micah’s time blatantly ignore these standards (compare Malachi 2:9, next week’s lesson). All they are interested in is what reward, in the form of *a bribe*, they can obtain for their services.

The *priests* and *prophets*, whose offices are especially sacred, are no better. They too are guided by financial rather than spiritual priorities. They are willing to lie in order to earn their fee (see Jeremiah 6:13; Ezekiel 13:19; 34:2). The prophets are described as those who *tell fortunes for money*. The practice of divination was strictly forbidden for God’s people (Deuteronomy 18:10, 14). Its practice is listed as a reason why God’s judgment fell on the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:17, 18).

Paul will later teach that “those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” and be compensated for their work (1 Corinthians 9:14). His method and motive are very different from those condemned by Micah, however. The leaders of Micah’s day are motivated by greed, and they use a forbidden method to satisfy that greed. Neither greed nor a forbidden method applies to Paul.

C. Declaring God’s Presence (v. 11b)

11b. Yet they look for the LORD’s support and say, “Is not the LORD among us? No disaster will come upon us.”

As if these disgraceful practices are not enough, these fraudulent leaders have the audacity to claim God’s presence as a cover for their detestable conduct (see also Jeremiah 7:4). The Lord had promised to place his name in Jerusalem when Solomon built his temple there. But that promise remains contingent on the people’s obedience (2 Chronicles 7:12–22). The leaders in Micah’s day are prime examples of disobedience.

D. Deserving God’s Judgment (v. 12)

12. Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

Such arrogant, brazen behavior by the leaders of God’s people cannot be tolerated. The “disaster” that the leaders confidently claim will never come (Micah 3:11b) will indeed come—and its arrival will be unforgettably severe. *Jerusalem*, the great city of David, will be reduced to *a heap of rubble* (compare Leviticus 26:31; Isaiah 6:11; Jeremiah 22:6). No longer will anyone travel to Jerusalem to worship (contrast Psalm 122:3, 4). Instead, they will go to marvel at the extensive destruction that has taken place (1 Kings 9:6–9; compare Ezekiel 5:14, 15). *Zion* will be treated as nothing more than a *field* for plowing (Lamentations 5:18). The *temple hill*, which refers to the location of the house of the Lord, will be reduced to a forested area.

Approximately 100 years after Micah’s time, his prophecy of Jerusalem’s demise will be quoted by some of the elders in Jerusalem as a warning not to ignore Jeremiah’s message (Jeremiah 26:17, 18). They note that King Hezekiah heeded Micah’s warning. Rejecting this example and ignoring Jeremiah will imperil the whole city (26:19).

III. Heavenly Living (MICAH 6:6–8)

Micah 6 opens with the prophet's final appeal to the people to hear what the Lord has to say (see commentary on Micah 3:1). Whereas the previous call was aimed primarily at Judah's leadership, this one is directed at the people (6:3). The Lord portrays them as defendants on a witness stand, facing a series of questions from him. He proceeds to give the people a history lesson, recounting his gracious acts on their ancestors' behalf (6:4, 5).

A. People's Ideas (vv. 6, 7)

6. With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Micah appears to put himself in the position of the defendants who are on trial before the Lord (see Micah 6:2, 3). The questions he poses may reflect the people's genuine puzzlement (compare 6:7). More likely, they are meant to expose the people's willful ignorance (contrast Psalms 40:6–8; 51:16, 17).

Burnt offerings are foundational in the Old Testament sacrificial system (Leviticus 1). The daily requirement is two unblemished year-old lambs (Numbers 28:3). *Calves a year old* are even more costly than the two lambs. The question here suggests that God asks too much of his people! At least, this is how the people seem to justify themselves for their iniquities.

7a. Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?

Micah continues his questions by increasing the quantity of what might be brought before the Lord. Do numbers impress God? Is he looking for *thousands of rams* or *rivers of olive oil*? Again, the implication is that the people cannot give enough to please the Lord. In a way, this is true: without the heart behind the sacrifice, nothing will please God (compare Isaiah 1:11; Amos 5:22).

7b. Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

Micah raises the stakes even higher by suggesting the sacrifice of a *firstborn* child. The firstborn is of special significance to the Lord (Exodus 13:2). Child sacrifice is always forbidden (Leviticus 18:21; 20:2–5; Deuteronomy 18:10), but the argument here is not about child sacrifice. Rather, the people feel that not even giving the most extravagant sacrifice they can think of will please God.

B. God's Ideal (v. 8)

8a. He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.

God has not kept his desires secret; what he requires is not a mystery. God has revealed what he considers *good* and what he wants (see Deuteronomy 10:12, 13; Mark 12:33). It is not their gifts or offerings that God really desires. What he wants are the people themselves, given to the Lord in lives that reflect his priorities and passions (see 1 Samuel 15:22).

8b. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Acting *justly* should not be thought of strictly in terms of judgment. Treating people justly may be thought of as treating people just as God would treat them (examples: Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah

22:3; Zechariah 7:9, 10). This includes extending *mercy*, which can be expressed as forgiveness in many ways.

The key to understanding both justice and mercy lies in a relationship with God, which is where the challenge to *walk humbly* applies (see 2 Kings 22:19; Isaiah 57:15). Apart from such a walk, justice and mercy are unattainable.

These requirements given by Micah for coming before the Lord should not be used to justify salvation by works. Micah is not addressing the question, “What must I do to be saved?” The issue is that God’s covenant people must conduct themselves in ways pleasing to him. Micah’s audience is wrong to think that their offerings and rituals alone will please God. Christians today who think the same about their “Sunday only” acts of worship are equally misguided.

Conclusion

A. Humbly in Justice and Mercy

Micah courageously confronted the tragic lack of godly leadership for the people of God. While Micah’s words in the concluding portion of our printed text apply to all God’s people, they most certainly need to be exemplified in the lives of their leaders. One thinks of how Jesus looked at the masses in his day and saw them as “sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36). The same terminology could have been used to describe the people in Micah’s day, given how corrupt the leadership had become. What a difference it would have made if those leaders had taken the words in Micah 6:8 to heart!

Church leaders today would do well to make those words their standard of conduct. But whether Christian leaders are aligned with God’s will or not, the priesthood of all believers must still bring their lives to God as sacrifices (Romans 12:1; 1 Peter 2:5). Jesus has paid the price (Hebrews 7:27, 28). We do not worry about offering rivers of oil or thousands of animal sacrifices. Let us therefore search our hearts for strongholds that resist practicing justice and mercy. In humility, may we seek to please the Lord with our whole lives.

B. Prayer

Father, thank you for godly leaders! May the power of your Holy Spirit help us all to seek and do your will, even when—and especially when—our leaders stray from your paths. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God has revealed how to please him.¹

¹