Justice and the Prophets

This study focuses on justice as presented in Scriptures from the prophets and from 1 Corinthians on Easter Sunday. The prophets communicated God’s will to the people. They called for repentance and justice.

In Unit 1, God Requires Justice, the prophets issue God’s call for justice in the conduct of human affairs. Amos, Habakkuk, Micah, and Malachi convey that the laws of God require justice for the poor and the oppressed. The sessions from Micah and Malachi are a study of the responsibilities of leaders for practicing justice.

Unit 2, God Promises a Just Kingdom, continues a study of God’s justice. The lessons for Palm Sunday and Easter examine the promised Messiah as the defender of justice. Esther’s triumph is reviewed as demonstrating the prevailing of God’s justice. The unit concludes with the Lord’s proclamation of the redeemed nation where justice and righteousness are restored.

Unit 3, Called to God’s Work of Justice, explores ways people are called to participate in God’s work of justice. Zephaniah presents both a judgment against the wickedness and injustice of Jerusalem and a vision of restoration. Zechariah calls for a return to God’s ways of justice. In Jeremiah, God’s rigorous standards for justice are defined, and God’s people are given a choice to repent from their injustices by executing justice or facing destruction. Hosea calls the people to love and justice.
Corrupt Leaders

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COMPASSION AND CONFRONTATION

As I write this, Bill Cosby has been sentenced to prison for drugging and sexually assaulting a woman. An extensive report has made known widespread clergy sexual abuse of children and cover-ups in six Pennsylvania Catholic dioceses. The Mennonite Church, too, has its own shameful legacy of silence and cover-up of sexualized violence and lack of appropriate care for survivors. Recently, more and more women and men have stepped forward, despite personal risk, to name people who have abused them; in many cases, their abusers have been prominent figures and leaders in U.S. society.

The prophet Micah’s words against leaders in chapter 3 are graphic. Their abuse is chillingly described as cannibalism. Those who are trusted to protect the vulnerable, to look after the people, to keep society ordered, and to provide a conduit to God instead abuse their power and enrich themselves. The prophet speaks in the harshest of terms to them and says that the coming destruction is their fault.

In the 1990s, I was a case manager in a victim-offender reconciliation program (VORP). I heard the stories of many survivors of crime and other harm. In many cases, they were revictimized in the act of coming forward because they were dismissed, mocked, ignored, or attacked. Yes, today—as in Micah’s day—corrupt leaders hurt people. Also, as a society we often ignore and blame the people who are harmed. We need both compassion and confrontation. May we better embody the justice, mercy, and humility God desires.
Then I said,  
“Listen, you leaders of Jacob, you rulers of Israel.  
Should you not embrace justice,  
you 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,  
strip off their skin  
and break their bones in pieces;  
who chop them up like meat for the pan,  
like flesh for the pot?”

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.  
Yet they look for the LORD’s support 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 rubble,  
the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.

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?  
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?  
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.
EXPLORING GOD’S STORY AND VISION

Meet Micah. Today we meet the prophet Micah. Like Amos, Micah is an 8th-century BCE prophet, responding to the same threat of Assyrian invasion. Like Habakkuk, Micah is a prophet to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Micah speaks out forcefully against the corruption, injustice, and personal enrichment of leaders through use of their public offices. He is very critical of the Jerusalem establishment, comes from a rural, laboring background, and speaks protectively of his people (see 3:2-3). The force of Micah’s attack shows moral indignation and strong personal feeling. The prophet Micah calls out other prophets, priests, and leaders entrusted with dispensing justice. They are to connect the people with God, show the people by example how to live, and demonstrate God’s will for social order. Micah is an idealist, steeped in the Exodus tradition and Deuteronomic law that directs the people. The leaders are to live generously and harmoniously with neighbors because they remember God’s grace toward them in bringing them out of slavery (see Deuteronomy 5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7; 15:15; 16:9, 12; 24:18, 22).

The three main divisions of the book (chaps. 1–2; 3–5; 6–7) include one doom oracle and one salvation oracle each. They begin with the same verb, “hear” (also translated “listen” in the NIV) in the imperative mood. The leaders have not been listening, and Micah is trying to get their attention.

Listening and silence. Themes of listening and silence are the foci in chapter 3. Three sections of accusations are presented (vv. 1-4, 5-8, 9-12): the first and third start with “hear” or “listen” and the second with “the L ORD says.” The offense is stated in each section, then the L ORD’s (non)response is given. God’s lack of response is directly connected to the leaders not hearing: “The rulers who failed to hear the cry of persons who came to them pleading for justice will soon experience God’s refusal to answer their cry for help.” God doesn’t answer and has a hidden face (v. 4). The prophets, seers, and diviners hide their faces because there is no answer from God (v. 7). Micah speaks, though, and says that he is empowered by the “Spirit of the L ORD, and with justice and might” to denounce the people of Israel (v. 8). The leaders, priests, and prophets say that God is on their side and won’t bring...

destruction, yet Micah pronounces a threefold condemnation: “Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets” (v. 12).

**Delayed fulfillment.** This prophecy was not fulfilled in Micah’s lifetime. King Hezekiah (ca. 715–687 BCE) is credited with staving off destruction in Judah at the hands of the Assyrians.² However, the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrian Empire in the time of Micah. Furthermore, destruction as described by Micah did come to Jerusalem and the temple a little over a century later, shortly after the prophecies of Habakkuk and Jeremiah.

**What leaders do is important.** Leaders are in place to ensure justice without partiality. A fair judicial system, independent of political or personal gain, is the bedrock of a just society. In my human rights work, I learned that populaces lose hope when judges can’t be trusted to rule fairly because people stop believing that recourse for the mistreatment and abuse they’ve suffered is possible. Leaders can connect people to a sense of a moral universe. The priests and prophets whom Micah castigates for corruption are particularly repugnant because their offices are specifically for connecting people with God. Yet they have taken bribes rather than speaking truly and making true connections with the holy.

Micah’s vision for what should be is fueled by his understanding of a rightly ordered society. One of the devotional passages paired with our Scripture for this study is Deuteronomy 24:17-22, where we find specific commands from God for the richer members of society to have mercy on poorer or more vulnerable members. Even though the ones with more power have the right to hold the widow’s cloak as pledge or to collect for themselves their whole harvest, it is clearly not God’s will to exercise these rights. Because of God’s acts of mercy for the people of Israel in bringing them out of slavery, they need to be merciful, particularly toward the alien, the orphan, and the widow—in other words, those most likely not to have a social safety net. Zechariah 7:8-10, the other devotional passage for this lesson, adds the poor to this list. Mercy, compassion, and true justice are linked together, as well as having no evil in their hearts toward one another. True leaders who administer true justice show these traits.

² See 2 Kings 18–19; 2 Chronicles 32; Isaiah 36–37.
**True justice.** This is also Micah’s point in 6:6-8. Verses 6 and 7 here can be interpreted as earnest questions or sarcastic ones, that is, to really know how to please God or to cast off responsibility. Micah’s view is that extravagance in a worldly way misses the point. Who can bring thousands of rams (apart from Solomon; see 1 Kings 8:63; 2 Chronicles 7:5) or bring a child as a sacrifice (besides Abraham; see Genesis 22:1-19)?

At the heart of what God wants is a pattern of life that is just, merciful, and humble. God does not desire one, once-and-for-all offering; God wants a whole life, oriented to and in step with God’s values.

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**LIVING GOD’S STORY AND VISION**

1. **I sometimes wonder why corrupt leaders push my buttons so strongly.** On the one hand, they’re not typically people I know, and I can allow myself to think that they don’t affect me very much. On the other hand, I think that’s not at all true. The people who set, enforce, and adjudicate policy have a large effect on my life. Depending on the situation, they can have immediate life-and-death impact. I want the people with that kind of power to be moral people, certainly not abusive. In addition, people in leadership positions pledge to honor a bond of trust with the people in their care; I consider this to be a sacred pledge. Finally, leaders, particularly religious leaders, carry the weight of the institution with them, sometimes even the presumption that God is on their side. Some survivors of clergy sexual abuse report feeling as if the church and even God had abandoned them or orchestrated a punishment against them because of the religious office of their abusers.

For leaders, I think personal morality is important as well as public morality—one in the same. In my mind, leaders who are willing to treat family or even strangers in a degrading or exploitative way show that they do not value human life equally. How can I trust their fairness? How can I see amoral religious leaders as pointing truly to God’s ways?

I’ve heard many Christians talk about corrupt leaders in a forgiving way. I get that. It’s true that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God
(Romans 3:23), yet it’s also true that God abhors active, unrepentant sinners. Our passage from Micah today makes that crystal clear.

» When have you been disappointed by a leader? What was that like? Was it easy to overlook some things, but not others? Why or why not?

2. Consider your roles of leadership.

» How are you leading like a true leader, as depicted in the Deuteronomy and Zechariah passages?
» Where do you fall short?
» Are there areas in which you would like to change or grow?

3. Where do you think you’re being nudged to listen and hear better?

» What are the places of silence? Do you experience God’s silence in any area of your life right now?
» Think about your society or country. Where is better listening and hearing needed? Where do you experience God’s silence?

4. How do you think we do as a society in listening to people who survive abuse and other harms? As a church? How can we do better? Make a list of several specific things that you think can be done.

5. What would Micah say today? Take Micah 3 as your model:

» Who would Micah address?
» What major problems would Micah identify?
» What hope would Micah offer?
» What pronouncements of punishment?