

Micah 6 vs 1-8 A Call to Ministry

Introduction

Micah, like his fellow prophets, often had to deliver unpopular messages to the people of his day. Israel the northern kingdom and Judah its southern counterpart had both engaged in behaviour that fell seriously short of that required of nations seeking to follow after the Lord. The Northern kingdom was soon to be destroyed by the Assyrian superpower and its people forcibly exiled to other lands. Judah was being warned that a similar fate would befall her if she refused to repent of her sins and turn to the Lord. The issue was not primarily of wrong beliefs, though this may in part have been an issue; rather it was that the majority of people were living in a lifestyle that contrasted sharply with what they professed to believe. No-one is perfect, but there are limits to the mistakes we can make without attracting serious criticism about the choices we are making. There are times when someone's behaviour is so seriously short of acceptable standards that disciplinary actions have to be taken.

One example of such shortcomings was seen in a league football game in the Czech Republic on 22 or 23 October 2011. Jestrabi Lhota were playing Tynec-nad-Lebem. There were concerns about the referee prior to kick-off as he had apparently 'smelt like a brewery'. This increased when the game kicked off and he was staggering around the park and falling over for no apparent reason. After one particular fall he got to his feet and promptly red carded three Jestrabi players for no reason, unable to explain why he had taken this decision. The team managements and players agreed that the score at the time of the bizarre dismissals (1-1) would be the 'final' score and the remaining time of the match was played out in the middle of the park. League officials later annulled the result and suspended the referee. It will be of interest what charges are brought against the official as it is not against the league rules to officiate at a game when seriously intoxicated [Metro 24 Oct. 2011]. Maybe the rules might be changed after that embarrassing incident.

Yet amongst the people of God are there not times when words are uttered or actions carried out that fall short of how the people of God ought to behave. Although I thank God for the excellent quality of relationships that is the norm in this church, we can never take it for granted that it will always be the case. The evil one rejoices most of all when God's people can be tempted to dishonour their Lord and Saviour by their choices. We must constantly keep in mind whose we are and why God has placed us here on earth –to honour His name and bring delight to Him by the way that we live. Here was a strong challenge to the people of Judah –would they heed the call and would they make the necessary changes to their lives?

1. The Covenant Challenge (Micah 6:1-2)

Listen to what the Lord says: Stand up, plead your case before the mountains; let the hills hear what you have to say. ² Hear, O mountains, the Lord's accusation; listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth. For the Lord has a case against His people; He is lodging a charge against Israel. The form of message Micah utters is a legal challenge. In Old Testament times there was a common practice of covenant-making between individuals; between nations and in the Bible between the Lord and His people. These covenant treaties stipulated how the two parties ought to behave now that an agreement was in place. It spelled out the consequences if one or both parties violated the promises they had made. The most well-known form of these agreements were between a 'super-power' and a 'subject-state'. If the minor party had violated the agreement its leader had signed, it did not mean automatic warfare. Instead a representative of the major power would come and present the accusations to the guilty party and see if they were willing to admit their mistakes and correct the wrong done. If, however, there was no

change of heart and conduct then the ‘carrot’ would be followed by the ‘stick’. An example of this pattern with reference to Judah’s sin is seen in II Chronicles 36:15-21, from a time period a little later than Micah’s proclamation: ¹⁵ *The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent word to them through his messengers again and again, because he had pity on his people and on his dwelling-place.* ¹⁶ *But they mocked God’s messengers, despised his words and scoffed at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord was aroused against his people and there was no remedy.* ¹⁷ *He brought up against them the king of the Babylonians, who killed their young men with the sword in the sanctuary, and spared neither young man nor young woman, old man or aged. God handed all of them over to Nebuchadnezzar.* ¹⁸ *He carried to Babylon all the articles from the temple of God, both large and small, and the treasures of the Lord’s temple and the treasures of the king and his officials.* ¹⁹ *They set fire to God’s temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.* ²⁰ *He carried into exile to Babylon the remnant who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power.* ²¹ *The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfilment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah.* A similar pattern is seen in II Kings 18 where Hezekiah, King of Judah, rebelled against the Assyrians and then apologised when he knew he had made a mistake. However, the apology was not accepted, but God miraculously defeated the mighty army camped outside Jerusalem and the siege was lifted.

Here in Micah 6:1-2 nature is called to serve as a ‘witness’ to the offences committed by God’s people against their Lord, the Creator of heaven and earth. In a dispute between the people of God and their Lord, ordinary human witnesses could not stand between the two parties. In other places ‘heaven and earth’ are called to be witnesses between God and His people, for example, by Moses in Deuteronomy 4:26: ²⁶ *I call **heaven and earth** as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long but will certainly be destroyed* (They are also the witnesses in Deuteronomy 32:1). In a court cases the witness evidence is crucial. Evidence in a criminal case presented without witnesses may be circumstantial and lacking that clinching piece of evidence that removes all doubt over a possible conviction; If, however, a witness places a criminal at the scene of the crime at the right time and offers a motive for the action then it may be the vital piece of evidence required. Micah declares: *For the Lord has a case against His people; He is lodging a charge against Israel.* There are times when He speaks to you and me with a challenge about some area of our lives. Sometimes it is directly through our conscience; at other times through another person; maybe a private conversation with a friend or family member, or through the words of a sermon in church; when we go astray we need other people or the Lord to convict us of our need to sort out our lives –because this is a loving thing to do. Remember these words from Hebrews 12:5-12: *And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you,⁶ **because the Lord disciplines those He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as a son.** ⁷Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? ⁸ If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. ⁹ Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! ¹⁰ Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness. ¹¹ No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ¹² Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees!* At the human level as parents when our children misbehave we take time to seek to correct their behaviour, hoping to show them why it is better to do what is right in that situation. God here calls Judah to listen. We too need to have our spiritual ‘ears’ attuned to ‘hear’ His voice speaking into our lives.

2. **The History Challenge** Micah 6:3-5)

³*My people, what have I done to you? How have I burdened you? Answer me.* ⁴*I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery. I sent Moses to lead you, also Aaron and Miriam.* ⁵*My people, remember what Balak king of Moab counselled and what Balaam son of Beor answered. Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord.* ³**My people, what have I done to you?** There is anguish in the voice of the prophet as he articulates the pain in the heart of God when His people go astray. Can you provide examples where I have been unfaithful to you? Are there situations where your Lord has failed you? This question provides a window of opportunity for the people of Judah to respond if they think the charge is unjust or unfounded. **What have I done to you?** In some form of words might be uttered by a spouse to the one they had just found out had been unfaithful to them; or a business partner who has discovered that a trusted colleague has been stealing from the company purse and risking its financial future. It is a respectful question and the assumed lack of a response implies that the charge God brings against His people here is just. There is then a second question: **How have I burdened you?** This is a hint that many people in the nation had considered their religion old fashioned, that its rules were out dated. They viewed God as a bit of a ‘kill-joy’ when they wanted to ‘let their hair down’ and have some fun. Is that any different to many people today? They may know something about the Christian faith but say ‘Not for me!’ I want to live my own life, to do my own thing. ‘I did it my way’ – sang Frank Sinatra articulating the mindset of many people outside of Christ. Yet what is tragic is that it can at times be also true of believers when we wander away from the pathway that the Lord has for our lives. We have to be honest that our Christian lives are not spent on ‘cloud nine’, though we may have particular times when we feel particularly close to Him and blessed by Him. There are many very ordinary days when we must follow the guidance He has given us for living in His Word, without any special feelings or sense of direction about the choices before us. As we look back over our lives since we first trusted Jesus there are times for which we give thanks to the Lord, but also we are acutely aware of times when we made wrong choices and messed up our lives. The ‘if onlys’ that we cannot change. Thank the Lord that He forgives and forgets the sins we have confessed to Him. Psalm 103:11-13 speaks words of real encouragement to the child of God who is truly sorry for their sins and turns from them to the Lord. *For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who fear Him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.*¹³ *As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him;* The prophet pictures the ‘guilty silence’ from the people and reminds them of God’s urgent demand: *Answer Me.* There was of course no answer so God reminds them through the prophet of the extent of His love for them. The most important event, to which the prophets turned time and again, was the exodus from Egypt. The redemption from their sins and the formation of a nation out of a rabble of slaves (Exodus 20:1); Then He highlighted the provision of Moses, Aaron and Miriam to lead them on their journey through the wilderness, and how the prophetic utterances of Baalam in Moab (Numbers 23-24) intended to ‘curse’ Israel yet became a blessing to them instead in the purposes of God. Last of all, God said here: *Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord.* What journey was this? The final one from the last place where the Israelites camped for sometime on the far side of the River Jordan (Numbers 33:49; Joshua 3:1), to the first place they had on the west bank of the Jordan River (Joshua 4:19). The previous generation had crossed the Red Sea on dry ground; Joshua’s generation had likewise crossed Jordan forty years later. Joshua 4: 19-24 provided a permanent reminder to God’s people of His goodness to them. *On the tenth day of the first month the people went up from the Jordan and camped at Gilgal on the eastern border of Jericho.*²⁰ *And Joshua set up at Gilgal the twelve stones they had taken out of the Jordan.*²¹ *He said to the Israelites, In the future when your descendants ask their fathers, ‘What do these stones mean?’ ²² tell them, ‘Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground.’*²³ *For the Lord your God dried up the Jordan before*

you until you had crossed over. The Lord your God did to the Jordan just what He had done to the Red Sea when He dried it up before us until we had crossed over. ²⁴ He did this so that all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful **and so that you might always fear the Lord your God.** God has shown His people the evidence of His faithfulness and will come to ask them how they ought to live for Him in the light of such kindness. Do you pass or fail the history challenge today? Are you thankful for His goodness and mercy in former days and responding to such love with a life lived that is honouring to the Lord? Or have you and I forgotten His blessings and have become totally consumed with our problems and difficulties in the present time? I have mentioned it before that it is good to write down in a private notebook a record of our blessings at the time –so that when times are hard and we are really struggling that we can turn to it and be blessed all over again by our recollections of His grace in earlier months and years. God, through Micah, invites His people to take the history challenge and give Him all the praise and glory.

3. **The Memory Challenge** (Micah 6:6-7)

⁶With 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 oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? Micah pictures the people of Judea of his day asking these questions in response to the message of judgement he has proclaimed? In essence what does God want me to do to please Him? How ought I to live my life? What must I do to ensure I have eternal life when I die? Variations of these questions, expressed in a culturally appropriate form have been uttered down the centuries, including our own day.

These hypothetical respondents recognise that they have a responsibility to do something, to change their lives in order to please God. However, what they are suggesting is less than sincere. The tone of the responses is so pious and the examples offered so extreme that it is clear they have missed the point completely. In a Christian context a person might say: shall I insist on coming to Church not once, not twice, but a minimum of three service on a Sunday; will the Lord be pleased if I insist on putting 90% of my net income in the offering plate not a mere tithe and offerings like other Christians; I hope you get the picture of the absurdity of the questions –such a person is not being serious with these proposals. Sacrifices with calves more commonly were with animals from seven days old. To offer a one-year old animal was a much more expensive sacrifice to give and beyond that which God has required in the Levitical offerings. Then the hypothetical respondent graduates to offering *thousands of rams*. Solomon, at the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple (I Kings 8:63) offered thousands of animals as sacrifices on that occasion, but it was not required by God for an ordinary citizen to do that, even if they could afford to do so. The fact that these huge quantities are not being seriously entertained is in evidence with the reference to oil. In grain offerings, as in our cooking today a small amount of oil is added to the mix (see Exodus 29:40; Leviticus 2:1-8). No-one could take seriously the quantity mentioned here. The ultimate mockery of the worship of God is in reference to the sacrifice of a firstborn son. It was a Canaanite practice in the land that persisted for many years, but in the time of Abraham (Genesis 22) the Lord made it plain that killing children for any reason was not acceptable to Him. What appears here to be good religious language is at best a mockery of it. Anyone speaking to Micah in this way was not taking him –or God- seriously.

These people had access to the Word of God, had they chosen to listen to it. Would they remember what God wanted them to do and act upon it or would they fail to heed God's Word? It is salutary to ask how many hundreds of thousands of people have passed through Sunday Schools and Youth groups and adults through Churches and heard something of how God wants them to live their lives, but chose currently to do nothing about it. It is in many

cases not a lack of knowledge but a lack of will to take the step required to follow the Lord. Not too long ago, for example, two of us had a conversation with a man who had claimed to have read the holy books of a number of faith traditions and much else besides. He claimed a clear knowledge of the Bible and mentioned a man in a neighbouring church and one in our own church who had sought to guide him in God's way in earlier years, but he had chosen not to heed their advice. Yet there are plenty of others we have met who had a surprisingly good factual knowledge of some aspects of biblical truth but no desire to go God's way. There are of course other people who know nothing of God's love and grace and we have a solemn responsibility to seek as far as we are able to make Christ known to such people. Someone unknown once said it is not the parts of the Bible that I don't understand that I have difficulty with, but the parts that I do, and don't want to put into practice. The question of verse six: *with what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God?* is still the question today. The answer has to be nothing, simply yourself claiming the sacrifice of Jesus in your place, acknowledging that your sins are forgiven through what He did, and receiving Him into your life as Lord and Saviour. Our good deeds are a response of love towards God not a means to receiving salvation. Micah will declare in the final verse of this section how a person ought to live –if their claim to follow the Lord has credibility.

4. The Credibility Challenge (Micah 6:8)

⁸ *He has showed you, O man, 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.* What does the Lord require of us? This is the fundamental question in Micah's prophecy –*what is good*. How does this translate into daily life? He gives three principles for action:

(a) To act justly What does this mean for me in daily life in a secular society? Examples from this book include fair prices for both buyer and seller when houses are sold; integrity in legal and financial transactions (both in Micah 2:2); proper provision for the needs of the most vulnerable in society (Micah 3:1-2); Micah described a society where leaders priests and prophets are no longer respected as authority figures, due to malpractice on their part; In our own land how many politicians at Edinburgh and Westminster parliaments have not milked their housing allowance or expenses claims to extract untold thousands from the taxpayers? Of course most could do it within the rules they made for themselves and thus avoid prosecution that would be the fate of lesser mortals. Yet as we start going through society naming professions and vocations –how many are as respected as they would have been half a century ago? In the midst of declining standards around us to determine that we as Christians will commit to treating every one fairly and with respect; that we will do a fair days work for a fair days pay; if employers likewise to honour appropriately the dedication of those employed in your company; it is not only Christians who may choose to behave honourably, people of other faiths and none may also opt out from the crowd. Recently in a conversation with a really decent man who openly declared he was an atheist, yet had a high respect for what we were going as Christians. He mentioned in his workplace overseas that virtually all the men in his department were cheating on their wives with other women. It was the norm and expected –yet he had pointedly said that his values and standards were different and as a result stood out from the crowd. He saw it as clearly as a Christian should that there were standards of right and wrong and he wanted to live on the right side of the line. he also mentioned in his industry some business practices that were common, but thoroughly dishonest even if they were legal. God says here through Micah, no matter what other people are doing *act justly*, stick to your convictions. Will you and I do that –even if there may at times be a price to pay?

(b) *to love mercy* This word speaks of covenant loyalty, both in secular agreements and with the Lord. The language of Micah here is expressed in a legal covenant term *hesed*, implying that not only do we want to do the right thing –*act justly*– but to remember the basis on which we make such choices. We make agreements /promises when we get married; when we purchase a house or a host of other transactions; supremely when we commit our lives to the Lord Jesus Christ; Yet God says here through the prophet it is not about ticking boxes – we all do more than enough of that with paperwork. What is being asked here? *to love hesed*. In other words to take delight in doing what is right before God and in our relationships with other people, not to do it grudgingly –because we ‘have to’. Why? because God is *the compassionate and gracious God* (Exodus 34:6); He *delights to show mercy* (Micah 7:18b); Why is this important? Because if we have pleasure in doing what is right, because our heavenly Father wants us to have pleasure in it as He does, then it will not affect our attitudes when others around us are giving into temptation and delighting in inappropriate conversations or behaviour; we are not legalistically following a list of ‘Thou shall nots’, and with a solemn face; rather we are taking pleasure in doing what is good and honourable and appropriate for the best of reasons, supremely to please God, but it is also for the benefit of ourselves and other people around us. This is far more than playing with words; it is an approach to life. It is so easy to focus on what some other people are doing wrong and be tempted to lower our own standards and get down; rather than aiming higher to please our Lord and Saviour in whatever place we are and in whatever company we are found. This is so incredibly relevant to every day life at home, in the workplace or wherever we may be.

(c) *to walk humbly with your God* Here is a summary statement of the lifestyle of a man or woman of God. In Genesis 5:24 there is the obituary of a man called Enoch: *Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away*. Can you imagine the impact that man had on his peers? Every now and then there are Christian men and women who so radiate Christ that loads of people are just drawn to them. In a particular High School in my home area there was a Christian teacher in the school who was an extraordinary influence on the pupils. There were other fine Christians on the staff, but this man got through to the pupils in an incredible way. Several hundred wanted to come to the CU when he ran it; in the school I attended a couple of miles away we were fortunate to get half-a-dozen to the weekly meeting in the school! It is an attitude of heart and a passionate Christ-centredness. However, Micah is not speaking about results or the fruit of a godly lifestyle in our Christian ministry or vocation, rather his focus is more on our character and disposition. We are all called to be ministers or representatives of Christ wherever He has placed us. May we take up His call to minister in what ever setting and gain delight and satisfaction in pleasing Him as we *act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with [our] God*, Amen.