Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE how Micah confronted corrupt leaders; REFLECT on reactions to leaders who mislead and deceive people; and ADDRESS corruptions in leadership within the church and the broader community.

In Focus

Kim didn’t know what to think about Pastor Hindley’s newly bought house and car. He owned several businesses, but he had never bought extravagant things before. Plus she knew Pastor Hindley had done so much work for the community. Outside of being a pastor, he was also a congressional representative for the district. That’s what moved her to join the church and also volunteer for his latest political campaign. He always talked about justice and the well-being of the people in the community. He couldn’t possibly be misappropriating money. She kept her thoughts to herself and prayed that the Lord would reveal the true source of Pastor Hindley’s recent purchases. One day, while Kim was going through the records, she noticed some discrepancies in the books. She approached Pastor Hindley about them, but he just ignored her and muttered something about, “We can’t be saddled down with details.” Was he trying to evade her question? Could he be skimming money from his campaign funds to buy luxuries for himself?

In today’s lesson, we will discuss the effects of leaders who abandon the interests of the people they are positioned to support.
Keep in Mind

“But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin” (Micah 3:8).

Focal Verses

KJV Micah 3:5 Thus saith the LORD concerning the prophets that make my people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him.

6 Therefore night shall be unto you, that ye shall not have a vision; and it shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine; and the sun shall go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them.

7 Then shall the seers be ashamed, and the diviners confounded: yea, they shall all cover their lips; for there is no answer of God.

8 But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin.

9 Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity.

10 They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity.

11 The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us.

12 Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of the forest.

NLT Micah 3:5 This is what the LORD says: “You false prophets are leading my people astray! You promise peace for those who give you food, but you declare war on those who refuse to feed you.

6 Now the night will close around you, cutting off all your visions. Darkness will cover you, putting an end to your predictions. The sun will set for you prophets, and your day will come to an end.

7 Then you seers will be put to shame, and you fortune-tellers will be disgraced. And you will cover your faces because there is no answer from God.”

8 But as for me, I am filled with power— with the Spirit of the LORD. I am filled with justice and strength to boldly declare Israel’s sin and rebellion.

9 Listen to me, you leaders of Israel! You hate justice and twist all that is right.

10 You are building Jerusalem on a foundation of murder and corruption.

11 You rulers make decisions based on bribes; you priests teach God’s laws only for a price; you prophets won’t prophesy unless you are paid. Yet all of you claim to depend on the LORD. “No harm can come to us,” you say, “for the LORD is here among us.”
12 Because of you, Mount Zion will be plowed like an open field; Jerusalem will be reduced to ruins! A thicket will grow on the heights where the Temple now stands.

The People, Places, and Times

Heads. The heads of Israel were the heads of families. The elders of the tribes became the judges. This system was based on the cultural custom of the time. During the Exodus, Moses established a system that organized the heads in groups of tens, fifties, hundreds, and thousands in order to better manage and give leadership to the people (Exodus 18:13–24). By the time of David, these heads or judges began to be organized as a circuit court with delegated royal authority (1 Chronicles 23:4, 26:29, 28:1). This made it easy for them to become corrupt and dishonest. By the time of the prophets, the heads were known for taking bribes and being partial to the rich.

False Prophets. While there were many true prophets in Israel, there were also false prophets. These false prophets often offered messages of hope and peace. These messages comforted the people without pointing out their sin or challenging them to repent from their evil ways. The false prophets became rich from the fees they charged for their services. Often they would use pagan methods of divination or fortune-telling, which were strictly forbidden in the Law of the Old Testament. The Lord had given the people of Israel ways to evaluate a false prophet: one was if the message they had spoken came to pass (Deuteronomy 18:21–22), the other if they enticed the people to worship idols (v. 20).

Background

The Neo-Assyrian Empire was a very dominant and real threat to Jerusalem at Micah’s time. One of many ways Jerusalem prepared for conflict was to strengthen the economy so they would have the necessary resources to fight off both foreign and domestic threats. As today’s text suggests, the ways they pursued economic stability were immoral and did not align with the precepts of the Lord. Their stimulus plan was based on greed, exploitation, and senseless taxes, and as a result, moral corruption slowly crept in.

The rulers and leaders convinced themselves that their methods of governing were necessary because of the impending dangers. If you do something long enough, it becomes a part of who are; thus, treachery soon became merely business as usual. The culture spread, and soon landowners began taking advantage of farmers. The poor were subjugated, and they had no social or economic power to resist.

One of the ironies of this era is that individually and collectively the people claimed to depend on God, whom they knew and believed to be the ultimate lover of justice; however, the leaders were cynical and perverted righteousness.

At-A-Glance

1. Corrupt Prophets (Micah 3:5–7)

2. The Man of God (vv. 8–10)

3. Corrupt Leaders (vv. 11–12)
In Depth

1. Corrupt Prophets (Micah 3:5–7)

Micah is speaking on behalf of God and unveiling the sinister practices of the prophets in Jerusalem and Samaria. Micah not only classifies them as deceivers, but specifically identifies their transgressions (wrongdoings). War is imminent and the prophets are capitalizing on Jerusalem’s concerns by structuring their messages to benefit their paying audience, while those who cannot pay receive detrimental messages.

Micah explains that the punishment for misusing their gifts will be to stop hearing from God altogether. Those who continue to communicate these messages will be shown to have no knowledge of God and false. Those who claim to speak for the Lord and only talk of peace in order to gain a profit are not speaking for the Lord but only for themselves.

2. The Man of God (vv. 8–10)

Amid all of this, Micah stands up for justice. He proclaims his strength and courage so all will know he knows the depth of their corruption. He also informs them he understands the magnitude of the danger that he is in by speaking out. The eighth century B.C. was not very different from today’s society as far as the extent of corruption; someone seeking to change the economic and social structure would face social, political, and religious opposition much as Jesus, Medgar Evers, and Martin Luther King Jr. did.

Like many prophets before him and those who would follow, Micah is very clear that the power he speaks with is not his own. When God commissions an individual to carry out a task, it does not matter how monumental the task, what type of challenges are ahead, or how strong the opposition. God will fill His messengers with power, strength, and the Holy Spirit so they can complete the given assignment.

3. Corrupt Leaders (vv. 11–12)

Micah says the leaders are attempting to build up the city, but at the expense of the poor. There is no respect for justice or righteousness. The false prophets are not the only corrupt citizens in Samaria and Jerusalem; leaders in almost every area of their society has gone astray (vv. 9–12). As a nation and individually for many leaders, the focus quickly became prosperity by any means necessary.

Despite the fact that the nation has adopted a culture of cheating, lying, stealing, and marginalizing the poor, they profess that their “growth and success” is due to their dependence on and protection by God. Micah ends by telling people that the city they are working so hard to build will ultimately be destroyed.

Search the Scriptures

1. What were the prophets doing to the people (Micah 3:5)?

2. Based on Micah’s prophecy, what was the primary source of motivation during this period in Jerusalem (v. 11)?
Discuss the Meaning

1. How can we tell whether a preacher is leading us astray?

2. What makes a leader corrupt? Be sure to consider thoughts, words, and actions.

Lesson in Our Society

It can be very difficult to speak against leadership at any level. Some people naturally believe that if someone has been given a title or responsibility, they have integrity and will maintain the best interest of the people they represent. However, the Bible and life have provided us with many examples of leaders who have ill intentions, succumb to temptation, and take advantage of their positions. As children of God, our instructions are simple: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8). Every group that we are members of—our country, civic organization, religious institution, or sorority/fraternity—should follow the same statutes.

Make It Happen

After reading the Lesson in Our Society, discuss what we should do as Christians if we suspect a political leader is corrupt. Make a list of appropriate and inappropriate response methods. One way to respond is to confront the leader and withhold votes or cooperation with unjust policies and practices. With this in mind, consider your own community and whether this response is needed.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Micah 3:5–12

The prophet Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah, speaks to the Southern Kingdom of Judah. At this time, the Northern Kingdom of Israel has been under threat of destruction and will eventually fall into the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Micah’s warning to Judah is that the same could happen to them if they continue in their evil ways.

5 Thus saith the LORD concerning the prophets that make my people err, that bite with their teeth, and cry, Peace; and he that putteth not into their mouths, they even prepare war against him.

After an analogy comparing the leaders of Judah to cannibalistic shepherds, Micah then focuses on Judah’s prophets, who are causing the people to err (Heb. ta’ah, tah-AH) or wander. The prophets cause the people to go astray and wander from God and His truth—the opposite of their true role as spokesmen for God. Instead of speaking for God, they speak on their own and draw people away from God. Micah says that they “bite with their teeth.” The word “bite” can also be used figuratively as “to vex” and “to oppress.” The image is of a snake or other sharp-fanged creature causing harm through biting. The prophets vex and oppress the people by offering prophecies for money. Ironically,
after committing such a poisonous and potentially lethal practice, they cry “Peace!” The Hebrew word for peace is shalom (shah-LOME), which refers to peace, prosperity, and general welfare. Such a cry is a double-entendre because although there is no peace for the people, the leaders prosper from their swindling. In addition, shalom is sandwiched between two acts of violence (biting and war), making it an even more deceptive promise for the people. The prophets’ message of peace is their selling point; they tell the people that everything will be well and receive the people’s money and applause. However, this is a false peace; those who will not give to them will be the objects of their hostility.

6 Therefore night shall be unto you, that ye shall not have a vision; and it shall be dark unto you, that ye shall not divine; and the sun shall go down over the prophets, and the day shall be dark over them.

As a result of their false prophecies and oppression, God will judge the prophets, manifesting itself in their lack of prophetic sight. Micah says that the prophets will experience darkness, and they will not be able to divine (Heb. kasam, kah-SAHM). Divination was a common way to understand the will of the gods. This was done through various methods; some would read and interpret the liver of animals or the position of fired arrows, while others studied dreams and visions. The latter is probably the method used by these false prophets of Judah. The sun going down and the day turning dark are metaphors for the loss of the prophets’ gifts.

7 Then shall the seers be ashamed, and the diviners confounded: yea, they shall all cover their lips; for there is no answer of God.

Micah announces the fate of the seers (Heb. khozeh, kho-ZEH) and diviners (Heb. kasam, kah-SAHM): they will be ashamed and confounded, and experience the humiliation of lepers by having to cover their lips (Leviticus 13:45). The prophets will be considered unclean like lepers because they have “no answer of God.” Their lack of honesty and true relationship with God will be evident. Because their falsehood is on display, they will cover their lips and feel the same shame as those considered outcasts to the covenant community.

8 But truly I am full of power by the spirit of the LORD, and of judgment, and of might, to declare unto Jacob his transgression, and to Israel his sin.

Micah declares his distinction from the false prophets. He says that he is full of power (Heb. koach, KOH-akh) by the spirit of the Lord. He is also full of judgment (Heb. mishpat, mish-PAWT) and might (Heb. gevurah, geh-voo-RAH). Micah’s “judgment” here is the establishment of right through fair and legal procedures in accordance with the will and laws of God. Micah has aligned himself with the cause of justice, and by using the words “power” and “might,” he states that this cause is God’s cause and he is equipped to be victorious.

9 Hear this, I pray you, ye heads of the house of Jacob, and princes of the house of Israel, that abhor judgment, and pervert all equity.

Micah particularly addresses the political and religious groups of Judah. He calls out the heads and princes responsible for establishing the religious and political moral standards for the people. The Lord, through Micah, accuses them of hating or abhorring what is just. The word “abhor,” or ta’av (Heb., tah-AHV, to loathe, detest, or make abominable) is a strong indication of how far those who rule over the Hebrews have fallen from God. They are not instructing people with fairness, but seeking their own gain and pursuing personal agendas.

Not only do these rulers and chiefs abhor justice, they also pervert equity (Heb. yashar, yah-SHAR,
that which is straight, right, or just). This word also denotes fairness and being honest and aboveboard. Those who rule over Judah do not practice such honesty.

10 They build up Zion with blood, and Jerusalem with iniquity.

The prophet continues to personalize the accusation against Judah. In the name of religion and sacrifice to God, the people have erected buildings using perverse and deceitful means. Instead of using tithes and offerings to establish places of worship, the religious leaders have taken from the poor and, in some instances, killed to expand Jerusalem. Archaeology testifies to the building activities underway in Jerusalem during Micah’s prophecy. Such capital activities were performed at the expense of the oppressed and less fortunate. Jeremiah makes reference to similar activities, mentioning those who build their homes by unrighteousness (22:13). The prophet Habakkuk also records official building with bloodshed (2:12).

The name “Zion” refers to the hill between the Kidron and Tyropean valleys that David captured from the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:7). After the building of the temple to the north of the hill, Zion became the center of the Lord’s activity, since the temple was where Yahweh dwelt. The term “Zion” may refer specifically to the temple vicinity or Jerusalem in general. Thus, Micah’s reference to the people building Zion up with blood shows how this holy habitation had been defamed and desecrated.

11 The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us.

Micah again compels Judah to reexamine its political and social ethics. The rulers who govern civic and state affairs are corrupt. The priests who dictate religious standards practice evil. The prophets who speak the Word of the Lord only do it for money. Micah contends that Judah’s leadership has turned away from the Lord. Those in power only want to be compensated by humankind for what God has gifted and instructed them to do. Rulers give judgment for a bribe, priests teach for a price, and prophets give oracles for money. Micah stresses the greed and insatiable materialism pervading Judah.

These leaders, however, believe that what they do is good and pleasing in the eyes of the Lord. They are convinced that since Zion is the dwelling place of God and that since the Hebrews are God’s chosen people, all is well and their transgressions can be overlooked. Speaking rhetorically, Micah states that those in authority did not lean on the Lord. The word “lean” (Heb. sha’an, shah-AWN), means to lie, rely on, or rest on, often with reference to God (2 Chronicles 14:11). Isaiah uses another verb for leaning in stating how Judah must depend on God (48:2). Such leaning implies a need to find favor and obtain support. Judah wishes to engage in wrongdoing while depending on the Lord for safety. The leaders, despite their unscrupulous conduct, believe that God will protect them because of His faithfulness and promises. The people do not see the error of their ways; they are so obstinate and spiritually blind that they are convinced that because the Lord dwells in Zion, no harm can come to them even when they sin against God.

12 Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places in the forest.

Because Judah has become prideful and sinful, the Lord, through Micah, predicts its ensuing destruction. The crassness of the leaders will result in the leveling of Jerusalem and its temple. Micah made a similar pronouncement earlier stating that Samaria would be a heap and a place for planting vineyards, i.e., a desolate, open land (1:6). This prophecy is remembered a century later when the people of Israel observe its fulfillment (Jeremiah 26:18–19). Both prophets were foretelling the
captivity of Judah by the Babylonians and the exile afterward. Judah, during Micah’s time, was already a vassal state of the Assyrians; further enslavement was the next step.

Again the prophet specifically names Zion and Jerusalem, the center of Israelite worship, as places to be destroyed. No place was beyond God’s wrath when evil has been committed. Micah personalizes the message and the plans of God to show Judah’s leaders their ill behavior.