



Sermon Transcript July 12, 2020

Do Justice Lets Get to the Root of It All Micah 2-3

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Sermon Text

Micah 6:8

⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 2:1-13

¹ Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand. ² They covet fields and seize them, and houses and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance. ³ Therefore thus says the LORD; behold, against this family I am devising disaster, from which you cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster. ⁴ In that day they shall take up a taunt song against you and moan bitterly, and say, "We are utterly ruined; he changes the portion of my people; how he removes it from me! To an apostate he allots our fields." ⁵ Therefore you will have none to cast the line by lot in the assembly of the LORD.

⁶ "Do not preach"—thus they preach—"one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us." ⁷ Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Has the LORD grown impatient? Are these his deeds? Do not my words to good to him who walks uprightly? ⁸ But lately my people have risen up as an enemy; you stirp the rich robe from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. ⁹ The women of my people you drive out from their delightful houses; from their young children you take away my splendor forever. ¹⁰ Arise and go, for this is no place to rest, because of uncleanness that destroys with a grievous destruction. ¹¹ If a man should go about and utter wind and lies, saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink," he would be the preacher for this people.

¹² I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob; I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in a pasture, a noisy multitude of men. ¹³ He who opens the breach goes up before them; they break through and pass the gate, going out by it. The king passes on before them, the LORD at their head.

Micah 3:1-12

¹ And I said: Hear, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Is it not for you to know justice?—² you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin

from off my people and their flesh from off their bones,³ who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces and chop them up like meat in a pot, like flesh in a cauldron.⁴ Then they will cry to the LORD but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.

⁵Thus says the LORD concerning the prophets who lead my people astray, who cry “Peace” when they have something to eat, but declare war against him who puts nothing in their mouths.⁶ Therefore it shall be night to you, without vision, and darkness to you, without divination. The sun shall go down on the prophets, and the day shall be black over them; the seers shall be disgraced, and the diviners put to shame; they shall all cover their lips, for there is no answer from God.⁸ But as for me, I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob and to Israel his sin.⁹ Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel, who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight,¹⁰ who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity.¹¹ Its heads give judgment for a bribe; its priests teach for a price; its prophets practice divination for money; yet they lean on the LORD and say, “Is not the LORD in the midst of us? No disaster shall come upon us.”¹² Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.

Introduction

The more I study, read and contemplate the issue of race and the sin of racism, the more complex the issue becomes to me. The complexity around this issue is forcing me to become more precise in my thinking on this topic and in my communication about this topic. That is a good thing. As a follower of Christ and as a pastor, I need to make sure what I say on the topic of race—and on any topic, for that matter—comes out of Christian worldview that is anchored in the Scriptures and informed by the gospel. This is the end to which I strive for the glory of God and the testimony of Jesus.

One of the reasons for the complexity surrounding the topic of race is the many opinions, voices, perspectives and experiences when it comes to racism. Most people would readily agree that to grow up black in our country is a different experience than growing up white. That alone is not necessarily a right or a wrong. It is just a fact. That fact is just one dynamic that brings complexity and tension to the problem of racism.

As I have been processing the issue of racism, there are three tensions I feel that add a measure of complexity to this conversation. One of these tensions exist between the church and the culture. The other two tensions are things I feel within the context of the church. So I want to begin by identifying these three tensions.

A Secular Worldview vs. A Christian Worldview: As Christians, we believe that the most ultimate, central and foundational reality in all the universe is God. Before the universe existed, there was the eternal God from whom we exist and in whom we are dependent. Consequently, this defines for us the central problem our world faces. It is not racism. Instead, no one living on this planet fulfills God's design for those he created. John Piper says it this way, "We have all sinned. We have all exchanged that glory we were made to enjoy, we exchanged that glory for images—especially the one in the mirror."¹ Thus, we don't find our treasure in God. Instead, we find our pleasure in ourselves and we live in a world where everyone is bent inward—to themselves. We love to be made much of. That is the biggest problem in our world. It is the backdrop to help us understand racism and oppression. It is not to say that secular answers to racism are necessarily wrong. But as George Yancey would say, they are "incomplete."² The reason he says that is because they fail to take into account the depravity of human nature found in both the majority and minority culture. Consequently, I have no problem coming to this conversation with the premise that there are hints of racism living in me. So, when we talk about racism, my first prayer is, *"Search ME, O God, and know MY heart! Try ME and know MY thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in ME, and lead ME in the way everlasting."*

An Individual Problem vs. A Systemic Problem: This does lead to a tension I feel in the church, a tension that exists among evangelical Christians. When we talk about the sin of racism, are we talking about an individual problem (a few bad apples) or is the sin of racism something that is "systemic" within the structures of our society? That is a big debate today. For some reason, a number of Christians are quick to deny the existence of systemic racism. Evangelical Christians are often known for stressing individual responsibility for our sin and the need for "personal salvation" through faith in Jesus. That is true. But is it really a stretch to believe that our systems—which are made up of fallen people who are bent inward—perpetuate racist policies that continue to give advantages to one group while disadvantaging another. That is not something unique to the American experience. Every culture wrestles with injustice that exists within their systems and structures because they are occupied with fallen and sinful people. As you will see in our passage this morning, it is not unique to our time, either.

A Gospel Solution vs. A Social Solution: If the problem is sin, then the answer is the gospel. By gospel I mean the message of Jesus Christ crucified, buried and risen from the dead for the forgiveness of our sins. No law or social policy can change the heart. Jesus—the gospel—frees us up to repent of racism and prejudice and frees the other to forgive. This is why the church holds the greatest possibility for racial reconciliation.

But here is the tension. First of all, the history of our country shows that the church has often been on the wrong side of this issue of race. So it is one thing for us to have the message of the gospel but it is another thing for the message of the gospel to have us. I believe if the gospel “has us” it will move us towards social responsibility. That has long been the story of the church. Hospitals, orphanages, schools, adoption, care for the poor, championing the rights of women have long been rooted in the social responsibility that is born out of the gospel. But there is a tension in the church today over whether or not the church should engage in matters of “social justice.” And it is suggested that to do so, waters down the gospel. It becomes, as some would assert, a “social gospel.” Granted, there are legitimate concerns over how our secular culture may respond to the issue of social justice and it is good to be discerning in those matters. And yet, at the same time, addressing social injustice is not antithetical to the gospel. Where there is a redeemed people, there should be a redeeming influence. We ought to enter this issue with the confidence that our faith has something unique to contribute to the issue of racism. We have the gospel of Jesus Christ.

These tensions I wrestle with all sound so theoretical and philosophical. But this I cannot deny. There is a people. There is a problem. There is a pain. It is all very real and sometimes we need to put a face to it in order to see it. I share this video with you to put a face to sin of racism. https://youtu.be/Nzu4b2sA_H0

With these tensions in mind, we step into Micah 2-3. Each of these three tensions are addressed in this passage. Obviously, Micah 2-3 approaches life from a biblical worldview that finds God at the center of life. Furthermore, when Micah talks about sin in this passage it is both individual and systemic. This leads to injustice taking place in the land of Judah. **Sin is the root of the problem** and it shows up everywhere. But what is it that gets to the root of the problem? It is the gospel. Right in the middle of our passage we will see how God moves on their behalf and **it is God who roots out the problem**. This is the grace from which the call for us to act comes from in Micah 6:8. *“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”*

The Root of Injustice: Sin

As I introduced Micah to you last Sunday, I indicated that he was lamenting the injustice that plagued Judah along with the announcement of God's coming judgment. In Micah 1:8 we heard Micah cry, *"For this, I lament and wail."* It is in our passage this morning, Micah 2-3, we discover some of the details describing the nature of the injustice taking place at this time in Judah. In fact, he gets right into it in Micah 2:1. *"Woe to those who devise wickedness and work evil on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in the power of their hand."*

Micah is addressing people who are in positions of power. What we find is that they are misusing their power for their selfish gain. That is injustice. Micah says in Micah 2:1 that they lie in their beds at night, scheming how they can use their power to their own selfish advantage. Then when they get up in the morning—in broad daylight—they put their plan into motion. Why? *"Because it is in the power of their hand."* They have the power to do it and they occupy a place of privilege. Stephen Um says the working definition of the misuse of power is "taking the influence God has given you for the sake of the common good, and using it against others for selfish gain."³ Micah clearly has his prophetic sights set on the leaders of Judah in these two chapters. In Micah 3:1 and 3:9 he says, *"Hear this, you heads of the house of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel."* He asks these leaders in Micah 3:1, *"Is it not for you to know justice?"* He makes this assessment of them in Micah 3:9, they are leaders *"who detest justice and make crooked all that is straight."*

It is in Micah 2:2 that we discover the nature of the injustice perpetrated against the people of Judah. *"They covet fields and seize them, and houses and take them away; they oppress a man and his house, a man and his inheritance."* These rulers misuse their power to acquire property to the disadvantage of the poor. It is important to understand that in Israel the land was seen as a gift from God, an inheritance that was to stay in the family. Now, if someone came up against hard times financially, they could sell their land to pay off their debt, but even in that scenario their inheritance was not lost to them forever. Every 50 years, on the "Year of Jubilee" their inheritance was to be returned to the family to whom it was originally given. Gary Smith said of the inheritance of the land that a person's status was wrapped up in the land, their inheritance. *"Lose it, and he lost all the rights which were based on its possession, he had no 'place' in the community."*⁴ And now you have leaders, scheming as to how to work the system at the expense

of others. He says in Micah 2:9 that they drive out women and children from their homes. He says of their actions in Micah 3:10, that they *build Zion with blood*. This is exactly what happened when King Ahab coveted Naboth's vineyard. Naboth refused to sell it to him because it was his inheritance. So Queen Jezebel, misused her power to have Naboth falsely accused and executed for his supposed "crime" so that she could give Ahab what he coveted. That is an injustice, a misuse of power.

In Micah 3:2-3, the prophet likens the injustice the leaders commit against their own people to be like what the Assyrians—their enemy—would do when they conquered a people. They would instill fear through torture—flaying people alive. He says to these leaders, *"you tear the skin from off my people and their flesh from off their bones."* These leaders are an enemy to the people they were called to serve. Micah called this an injustice and a form of oppression. And it was systemic.

But it is not just the political leaders that Micah is speaking to in this passage. He also addresses the spiritual leaders of Israel for their silence on this matter. They fail to speak out against this injustice. They fail to defend the defenseless. In Proverbs 31:8 it says, *"Speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute."* In fact, they too are motivated by greed. In Micah 3:5 they cry "Peace" to the one who can pay them and "war" to the one who can't. In Micah 3:11 he says that *the priests teach for a price; it's prophets practice divination for money.* It will cost them something if they speak against injustice and against those in power. It always does. So these religious leaders fail to speak to the injustice—what Micah calls in Micah 2:1 *wickedness* and *evil*. In Micah 2:11 Micah says, this is the kind of preacher who is perfect for these people; it is the preacher who preaches to you *of wine and strong drink*. But not Micah. He is resolved to call out injustice. He says in Micah 3:8, *"But as for me, I am filled with power, and with the Spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin."*

The injustice called out in this passage is the misuse of power. Micah is speaking directly to political and religious leaders. You might be tempted to think that the problem of this passage has nothing to do with you because you don't occupy these positions of power. But we all have places of privilege and power in our lives; whether it be in families, the work place or even the church. How do you use that power? Positions of authority and power are essential to human flourishing. But how do we use the power and privilege we are given? That is the issue.

Furthermore, what sin is at the root of the misuse of power? What sin has a grip and a hold on the hearts of both the political and religious leaders at this time in Judah? For starters, we see in Micah 2:2 that they *covet* what does not belong to them. This is one of the Ten Commandments: “*You shall not covet.*” It says in Exodus 19:17. “*You shall not covet your neighbors house.*” This tells us that sin is not just found in the outward act that is committed, but it is rooted in the sinful desire of the heart. Michael Horton tells of a rabbi who said to him, “You know, one of the greatest differences between our two religions is this idea that you’ve committed a sin just by desiring or thinking it. We believe that you have to actually commit the physical act before it’s really sin. Otherwise, we’d be sinning all the time!”⁵ That is the problem, isn’t it?

But there is another sin that often plagues the heart of the one who is in power. In fact, this is a sin that is often at the root of racism and discrimination whether it is individual or systemic. Racism is the fruit of something deeper. There is a sin that lives underneath the sin of racism. What is it? Robert Fuller says “there is a common root that combines all these *isms* together, and that is the presumption and assertion of rank to the detriment of others.”⁶ He calls this sin “rankism.” It is using your rank—your place of privilege—to subordinate and dismiss another group of people or individual.

If we are really honest with ourselves, “rankism” is a sin that lives in all of us. With this sin, the value of a person is often tied to affluence, or success, or education, or title, or looks, or family, or political party . . . or even the color of someone’s skin; race and ethnicity. This sin of “rankism” is no doubt a temptation for anyone who is in power. And clearly, that has been part of the story of the history of our country from the beginning. Great injustice has been done because of the sin that sees greater value in one group of people over the other. How that injustice has been demonstrated has evolved over time and one group has benefited from the disadvantage of the other. That is systemic injustice rooted in the sin of “rankism.”

This is where the Christian worldview comes into play when it deals with this topic of race. George Yancey says “Our sin nature blinds us to the ways in which we protect the interests of our own racial group. Our sin nature influences us to blame others for the problems we cause ourselves.”⁷ So here is what happens. Each side blames the other for the problem that exists. Whites suggest that Blacks are to blame because they fail to take responsibility to fix their problems, all the while

denying 400 years of injustice which have significant lingering effects to this day. Blacks, on the other hand, may be quick to pin all the ills of their community on the actions of those in the majority culture, absolving themselves of any responsibility. This is what grieves me the most about the tone of this conversation in our country, especially when I see it within the walls of the church. It is the unwillingness to acknowledge the sin that lives inside of “me.” If I don’t start with my own “rankism” then I will not be able to use my place of power and privilege for the common good. Like the African American spiritual I must sing, “Not my brother, not my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, Standin in the need of prayer . . . It’s me, it’s me, O Lord, Standin in the need of prayer.” My sin and your sin is at the root of injustice. It is at the root of the misuse of power and oppression. It is at the root of racism.

Rooting Out Injustice: The Gospel

So how do we get to “the root of the problem?” How do we address the heart in a way that there can be racial reconciliation? We need God. We need the gospel to root out the sin of “rankism” that leads to the oppression of others. So what do we discover about God in this passage?

The first thing we discover is that God is very angry about injustice. Look what it says in Micah 2:3. *“Therefore thus says the LORD: behold against this family I am devising disaster, from which you cannot remove your necks, and you shall not walk haughtily, for it will be a time of disaster.”* We just talked about the sin of “rankism” where the one in power thinks of himself as greater than the other. But when God acts in judgment, those who once thought of themselves highly will not be walking in pride and will not be able to lift their head—their neck—above the other. Then in verses 4-5 it is as if God is taunting them with a mocking song. Gary Smith says it is as if the singer is singing sarcastically, “Isn’t it too bad! It is so unfortunate, what these rich people had to go through. What they coveted and stole is now being taken from them. They’re going to end up with nothing. Doesn’t it just break your heart to see them get what they deserve!”⁸ He ends Micah 3 by saying that even though their religious leaders are assuring them that no disaster will come upon them, Micah says, *“Therefore because of you Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.”* I would also add that I am struck by how injustice hinders our prayers. He says in Micah 3:4 that *they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them.* That is similar to what Peter says to husbands who speak harshly to their wives; it hinders their prayers.

God is just. Some people have a problem with the idea of God's anger and God's wrath. But Stephen Um asks us "to imagine for a moment, as uncomfortable or unnerving as it may be, how refreshing these verses would be to you if you were truly poor or powerless."⁹ In other words, the justice of God assures us that God has a short leash on oppression. Look at all the anger and rage that is spilling out on the streets as a result of the injustice of racism. Granted, as sinful humans respond with anger, it is not always a righteous display of anger. But there is a legitimate reason for the anger. It is an anger that gives evidence to the fact that things are not the way they ought to be. It is a longing for justice.

And here is the thing that must give us pause. We just acknowledged that the sin of "rankism" is something that plagues every human heart. John Piper describes our sin as "belittling God and committing treason against God." We all are guilty of it. He goes on to say, "In God's unimpeachable justice, he opposes us therefore with great wrath. He is very angry at the human race. Which means that we would be utterly and eternally lost, undone, desperate, going to hell—we would be undone eternally if God weren't more than unimpeachably just."¹⁰ But he is more!!!

One of the things I love about reading through these Old Testament prophets is so often when they are boldly proclaiming the coming judgment of God—and often they don't mince words or sugar coat the severe nature of the judgment of God. But right in the middle of their declaration of judgment, often there is inserted a measure of hope. Micah does this several times. He does it in our passage this morning. At the end of Micah 2, literally in the middle of our passage this morning

So we read these great words of hope in Micah 2:12-13. *"I will surely assemble all of you, O Jacob; I will gather the remnant of Israel; I will set them together like sheep in a fold, like a flock in a pasture, a noisy multitude of men. He who opens the breach goes up before them; they break through and pass the gate, going out by it. The king passes on before them, the LORD at their head."* We can't fix the human heart, but God can. Three times we hear God say in this passage, *"I will."* I love the image here, this great Shepherd of the sheep comes bursting through the breach, he comes through the gap, he breaks through the gates of oppression and gathers his sheep—helpless and dependent sheep. Of course, we can't read these words without hearing the full revelation of Scripture where Jesus says *"I am the Good Shepherd."* And do you know what Jesus does as he bursts through the breach? He turns "rankism" upside down!

He says *Blessed are the poor*. He sets free the captive. He turns it all upside down. How so? He who is of highest rank comes down the ladder and humbles himself. He takes our judgment. On the cross, he who was rich became poor for us.

I love how in this passage it says that this Shepherd, the King, our LORD goes out in front of *a noisy multitude of men*. Do you know what he is saying here. Through the gospel, we are a group of people who know what it is like to gain at the expense of someone else when we didn't deserve it. And so now we follow suit. With the heart changing work of the gospel we now use what we have, at the expense of ourselves, for the benefit of others. It is as we follow him, we will burst through the gate of oppression and we will bring healing. This is why the gospel is the answer to the injustice of racism.

Conclusion

Do you have the gospel? That is the first question. It is the only thing that can transform your heart and make you right with God. Turn to Jesus in faith. Here is the second question. Does the gospel have you? If so, allow the gospel to examine your heart to see where there might be the spirit of "rankism" in your heart, especially in the issue of race. This frees us up to see oppression wherever it is. It frees us up to the idea that we may consciously or unconsciously contribute to it. It frees us up to turn "rankism" upside down and to take what I have been given and use it for the good of the other. Or as Paul says in Philippians 2:3-5. *"Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility, count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus."*

The root of injustice is sin.
It is the gospel that roots out our sin.

May the gospel so form our hearts that we will be people of peace in a contentious time. May the gospel so form our hearts that we will rush to speak out against oppression where we see it. May the gospel so form our hearts that racial reconciliation will begin in each of our hearts as we use what we have been given for the good of the other. May we be a noisy group of men and women who follow our Shepherd—our King—and our Lord as he bursts through the gate of oppression, bringing healing to the nations in the name of Jesus!

¹John Piper “Race is More Than Just a Social Issue” YouTube August 26, 2017

²George Yancey *Beyond Racial Gridlock* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006) 12

³Stephen Um *Micah For You* (The Good Book Company, 2018) 46

⁴Gary Smith *Hosea, Amos, Micah: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) 464

⁵Recounted in Michael S. Horton *The Law of Perfect Freedom* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993) 167

⁶Robert Fuller *All Rise* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler, 2006) 5-6

⁷Yancey, 80

⁸Smith, 465

⁹Um, 36

¹⁰Piper