

# A DISPLAY OF FALSE PROPHETS

## Micah 2:6-II

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“Do not preach” – thus they preach – “one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us” (Mic. 2:6).

**I**t is sometimes cynically said that no good deed ever goes unpunished. That may be practically true in a world like ours. But it is definitely true that no faithful ministry of God’s Word ever goes unopposed. The devil opposes the gospel by both attacking its messengers and blinding the hearts of its hearers. On a human level, the preaching of God’s Word is opposed in two main ways. The first way is to directly attack the faithful preachers. The second is to pay your own preachers to give sermons more to your liking.

It was the second kind of opposition that especially galled the prophet Micah. Having threatened the greedy land barons with divine judgment, they got their own prophets to preach that all was well. Micah’s contemporary, Isaiah, regarded this situation as proof of Jerusalem’s apostasy: “For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD” (Isa. 30:9).

### STOP PREACHING! THEY PREACH

**I**t was not that Jerusalem’s greedy rich did not tolerate preaching, but only that they refused preaching that made them uncomfortable.

People with great wealth usually do not have difficulty finding a preacher to suit their tastes, and such well-financed mouthpieces are eager to take on annoying prophets. This was the situation in Micah’s Jerusalem. As Peter Craigie puts it, “The best way to deal with a

preacher is to set other preachers upon him.”<sup>1</sup> Micah begins his fourth oracle complaining about these false prophets: “‘Do not preach’ – thus they preach – ‘one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us’” (Mic. 2:6).

The word for “preach” in this verse is not the usual word for prophesying. Its root meaning is that of “dripping,” which suggests a pejorative slant on preaching: “Stop preaching at me!” But Micah turns this back on his enemies, using the very same word in saying, “thus they preach.” We might translate the verse to read, “‘Stop your incessant preaching,’ they incessantly preach.”

What bothered the false prophets so much was that Micah and his colleagues declared God’s condemnation and judgment on the ruling classes of Jerusalem. As a result of their labors, Micah had not only the difficulty of standing up to the wealthy exploiters of the poor, but “he must also cope with the army of preachers whose public proclamations supported their patrons.”<sup>2</sup>

False prophecy is a common and baneful phenomenon in the history of God’s people. All through the Bible, God’s true messengers are set upon by false prophets. This happened during the exodus, when the false prophet Korah led the people to rebel against Moses’ leadership. Korah became so obnoxious to the Lord that God finally opened the ground to swallow him (Num. 16:32-33). But the people paid a fearful price for listening to the false prophet, including defeat in battle, the loss of thousands in a plague sent by God, and ultimately God’s refusal to allow them to enter the promised land, so that the entire generation died in the wilderness (see Num. 14-16).

After Israel settled into Canaan, they continued to be plagued with false prophets. Each of their unbelieving kings was sure to be supported by false prophets, who declared the Lord’s approval and received the king’s favor in response. In one famous example, Judah’s righteous king Jehoshaphat was asked to assist Ahab in a foolish military expedition. Jehoshaphat was suspicious when Ahab’s cackle of false prophets assured them of victory, so he asked, “Is there not here another prophet of the LORD whom we may inquire?” (1 Ki. 22:7). His meaning was that he desired a prophet who was not paid

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<sup>1</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1985), 2:22.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

off by the king. Ahab's answer was revealing: "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil" (1 Ki. 22:8). Despite Micaiah's warning of disaster, Ahab listened to his false prophets, losing the battle and his life as a result.

Indeed, all the prophets were opposed by false counterparts. Amos was accused of treason by the false prophet Amaziah for prophesying judgment on Samaria, so Amos responded with a woe of doom on Amaziah (Am. 7:17). When Jeremiah warned Jerusalem of coming destruction a hundred years after Micah, the false prophet Hananiah assured the people that all would be well (Jer. 28:1-4). As a result, Jeremiah was cast into a cistern and the unbelieving city fell to the Babylonian sword. Of course, the most notable instance is the opposition of the Pharisees and scribes to the preaching of Jesus. Speaking for all the prophets before him, including Micah, Jesus warned, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in" (Mt. 23:13).

False prophecy remains the bane of God's people to this day. Whether Bible-believing Christians confront evolution, abortion, the sexual debaucheries of pornography and homosexuality, racism, or supercharged materialism, at the forefront of our opposition are false prophets, who assuage sinful consciences and lull the people into a deeper and deeper moral slumber.

Micah records the substance of the false preaching directed against him and his faithful colleagues: "one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us" (Mic. 2:6). They were complaining about Micah's prophecy of coming judgment on Judah's idolatry and sin. This is the hallmark of all false prophecy: a denial of God's judgment of sin. False prophets today loathe above all else the Bible's teaching on sin and judgment, and therefore its teaching of the atoning blood of Christ. Increasing numbers of supposedly evangelical preachers now scorn the teaching that Jesus died for sinners, receiving in their place the wrath of God their sins deserved. In place of the Bible's teaching on sin and the cross, false preaching today emphasizes human goodness, moralistic works, health, wealth, and prosperity, and lifestyle training that mimics self-help psychology. It was by false prophecy that Satan coerced Adam and

Eve into the fall of our race, saying to Eve, “Did God really say...?” (Gen. 3:1, NIV). False prophecy remains one of Satan’s most potent weapons today.

In the Old Testament, the typical result of false prophecy was to give the people a false sense of security. When the people fell into sin and idolatry, God sent the prophets to warn them, but the false prophets assured them that God would never judge them. “‘Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace,” Jeremiah complained (Jer. 6:14, NIV). This same message persists today, as lying pulpits assure the sexually immoral, greedy, and unbelieving that all is well with God, even though the Bible insists, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

## SMOOTH VERSUS TRUE THEOLOGY

The Bible’s critique of false prophecy indicates that the most vital institution of any nation or people is the church pulpit. True preaching awakens the mind and heart to the truth of God, but false preaching deadens the heart to sin and darkens the mind with eloquent lies. Yet how common it is, in ways small and large, for the pulpit to become captive to moneyed interests! It happens when the pastor declines to preach messages deemed unpopular by large givers. It happens when Christian organizations succumb to expand their donor base by broadening their message, or enter into political alliances that limit the range of their preaching. It happens when consultants persuade churches that a more “relevant” message than that of the Bible will increase the size of the church. The worst form of this pulpit perversion occurs when corrupt rulers enter into an adulterous marriage with false prophets, so that the most unfaithful preachers become the society’s most influential. When this occurs, the people’s departure from the ways of God is dramatically hastened.

How do false prophets support their perverted doctrines? The answer is illustrated by Micah’s description of the smooth theology of the false prophets he faced. They argued: “Should this be said, O house of Jacob? Has the LORD grown impatient? Are these his deeds?”

First, we see a false theology based on only one facet of God’s character, without painting the whole portrait: “Has the LORD grown impatient?” they asked. The false teachers were reminding the people of a glorious truth: God’s long-suffering grace. After all, God had

revealed himself to Moses, “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:6-7). “Isn’t this the character of our God?” the false prophets insisted. So how could Micah go about threatening God’s people with judgment, when God had promised mercy, grace, and infinite patience? The problem is not with the truth the false prophets taught, but with the other truths they so carefully left out. In this case, they stopped reading before God was done declaring who he is. If they read all the way to the end of the sentence they would have included this teaching: “but who will by no means clear the guilty” (Ex. 34:7). The God of grace is also a holy God of justice who punishes sin. That was the inconvenient truth the false prophets smoothed out. Their attitude was that of an atheistic philosopher who recently quipped that if there turned out that there is a God he was not afraid, because “God has to forgive – that’s what God does.”

The false prophets’ second argument had to do with God’s deeds: “Are these his deeds?” They would have pointed to God’s great acts in their history, especially God’s deliverance of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. “God has always blessed and protected us,” they would have argued, “and so he always will!”

This shows why such people are called false *prophets* or false *preachers*: because they manipulate and pervert what God and the Bible have said. They present a smooth theology: a theology with everything hard and difficult taken out, and their message of convenient half-truths sanded down and polished by the most studied eloquence and the most profound oratorical pauses to appeal to the senses of carnal men and women. Leslie Allen comments, “Such was the case of the optimistic prophets, so plausible in its half-truths, so convincing to those who longed to believe it. Who could be so foolish as to want to demolish such comfortable doctrine?”<sup>3</sup>

I once counseled a young man who had been raised in a liberal church. He had decided to divorce his wife on the grounds that he realized that he didn’t love her after all. When I pressed upon him God’s condemnation of his proposed action, he glibly replied, “I don’t

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<sup>3</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 295.

believe in the God you talk about. My God is a God of love.” I replied to him that this was precisely his problem. It is because God is a God of love that he hates divorce. It is because God is a God of love that he could be counted on to take up the cause of his injured wife. It is because of God’s holy and true love that he will judge those who violate his loving commandments. But so ensnared was the young man by the false but convenient preaching of his upbringing that my warning had no effect. On the one occasion when I spoke to him afterwards, he informed me that his hometown pastor had persuaded him against my “narrow-minded” and “legalistic” counsel.

False prophecy not only deadens the conscience of hearers against the moral demands of God, but it also cheapens God’s grace. God’s true grace produces a harvest of holiness and peace, but cheap grace winks at sin and evil. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who coined the term, explained: “Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.”<sup>4</sup> In reality, cheap grace is no grace at all. Cheap grace incites a false presumption that will prove perilous when God’s judgment falls on sinners who have trusted it. But cheap grace is alive and well in the pulpits of our time. Comparing our situation to that of Micah’s Jerusalem, Bruce Waltke writes: “Just as dangerous today are false teachers who apply the doctrine of the believer’s security to those who disown their Lord in their lifestyles and who do not bring forth the fruit of repentance from sin.”<sup>5</sup> There is a true security in salvation, but it belongs only to those with a living, trusting faith in Jesus Christ and in God’s Word.

Along these same lines, Micah’s message was one of blessing and hope for those who receive God’s Word in faith. So he breaks in with a question to the smooth theology of the false prophets: “Do not my words do good to him who walks uprightly?” (Mic. 2:7).

This question is an appeal to receive and obey God’s true Word. It is true that God is full of grace and mercy. Therefore, we ought to receive all his Word as a source of blessing, including his warnings.

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer: *The Cost of Discipleship*, pp. 45-47.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary on Micah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 127.

When God teaches us to live a certain way, it is for our good in living upright lives that find his blessing. Not only *must* God's Word not be manipulated to suit our personal agendas, but it *should* not be held at arms length or resented. The reason is given by David in Psalm 19: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes" (Ps. 19:7-8). If this is true of God's Word generally, it is especially true of those teachings we find hard at first but which through faith become most precious to our souls.

## SOFT PREACHING, HARD HEARTS

A smooth theology of cheap grace is to be loathed because it does violence to God's Word and brings discredit on the true God of holiness and grace. But Micah's rebuke focuses on the terrible reality that false teachers produce enemies of God. Jesus insisted that a tree is revealed by the fruit it grows, and in this vein Micah condemns the false prophets for the kind of followers they raise up: "But lately my people have risen up as an enemy" (Mic. 2:8). The soft preaching of the false prophets had made hard hearts, just as it does today.

Since the blame of false prophecy lies equally with those who pay and applaud them, Micah addresses the evil landlords who stood behind the false teaching: "You strip the rich robe from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war. The women of my people you drive out from their delightful houses; from their young children you take away my splendor forever" (Mic. 2:8-9).

Such was the callous malice of the smug adherents of cheap grace that they were like bandits who ripped the robe off unsuspecting passersby. This may suggest that the rich land barons hired gangs of thugs to rip even the clothes off the back of those who owed debts from their usurious loans. They even went so far as to evict women and children from their homes, casting them out with nothing. This violated God's loving provision to his people in the Promised Land. The common homes may not have stacked up against the regal estates of the rich, but Micah calls them "their delightful houses." He refers to the land God had given for the bounty of his people as "my splendor." In order to add increments to their already vast wealth, the

greedy land barons drove out “forever” the women and children of Israel, so precious to God, from their God glorifying inheritance.

Verse 8 uses an expression that is rendered differently in various translations. The English Standard Version reads that the hard-hearted rulers strip the robe from those who pass by “with no thought of war.” This suggests that their victims were unsuspecting, with no idea that an attack was near. Probably a better translation is given by the New King James Version, which says that the bandits conduct themselves “like men returned from war.” Those returning from war are sometimes calloused in their spirits and made easy with violence. Especially in the ancient world, they would often come home hungry and ravenous in their appetites. This is what the smooth preaching of the false prophets engendered: hard-hearted, greedy, and violent abusers of power.

Not that the targets of Micah’s rebuke actually did any of this with their own hands. They would have remained high up in the capital city, issuing callous directives from their estates before hustling off to present their elegant persons at the temple, there to receive a polished sermon of half-truths from God’s Word. No wonder God said through Amos, “I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Am. 5:21, 24).

The business practices of Jerusalem’s greedy rich are replicated in our society today. The effect of the modern corporate structure is that those who make the business decisions are carefully distanced from the human results of their actions. Even a brief survey of business literature will prove that the one principle governing major corporations is that a company’s stock value wholly defines its success. When I attended a graduate school of business, I remember hearing that it was the duty of executive decision-makers to place the stock value above all other considerations, even if one’s decisions resulted in pollution to the environment, ruin to low-level employees, or corruption in the government – and this was in a business ethics class! Considered this way, the company exists solely to make money for its stockholders. If small businesses operated by families for generations are wiped out, if widows are evicted from their homes, if layoffs reduce loyal workers to penury, these things are simply “the cost of doing business.” The only sacrifices that cannot be made are

in the stock price and the ever-soaring executive compensation packages. All the while, the board members and CEO's live in a fairytale-land far removed from the common people about whom they neither know nor care – a world of rich estates, private jets, skyscraper views, and – all too often – richly appointed churches with smooth and elegant preachers whose tongues assure them of God's favor.

In reality, the assumption that short-term profits is all that matters is simply irrational, so that the bubble of irrational decision-making must ultimately burst. Moreover, it is evil, and it is only a matter of time before the God of holiness and love strikes back with vengeance upon the greedy rich who work violence against the common people.

It is with such a word of judgment that Micah concludes his message to the land barons who bought their false preaching with their ill-gotten money: “Arise and go, for this is no place to rest, because of uncleanness that destroys with a grievous destruction” (Mic. 2:10). Having evicted God's people from the homes and land God had lovingly provided, now wealthy elite are evicted from the land; the invading Assyrians will drag them off into an exile of slavery in a pagan land. Peter Craigie explains, “Those who by their actions had made others leave their homes would be required to ‘arise and go’. The greed of the land-grabbers did not only destroy others, widows and children, but would eventually return in the divine scheme of things to destroy themselves.”<sup>6</sup>

This reminds us that God's blessings are to be used for God's purposes. Positions, power, and wealth are not to be employed with violence or neglect for others and for personal gain alone. The land God gave to Israel was to be a land of pleasant rest, as a holy people enjoyed God's loving bounty. Micah thus describes the land-barons' policy as an abomination to the land: “uncleanness that destroys with grievous destruction” (Mic. 2:10). And just as the abominable nations who occupied Canaan before the Israelites were driven out and destroyed, so it would be with the apostate people of Jerusalem. Allen observes: “Their dirty conduct in ill-treating their needy neighbors has rendered them unfit to tread Canaan's soil any longer. So they are

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<sup>6</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *Twelve Prophets*, 2 vols., 2:24.

doomed to suffer agonizing ruin, involving loss of land, livelihood, and liberty.”<sup>7</sup>

Do we realize a similar loss of God’s blessing is taking place today in the midst of our fevered Western affluence? Our land of liberty is increasingly a land of bondage to the most vile and destructive sins. Our version of peace and prosperity increasingly is nothing of the sort. Rich only in money, we are increasingly poor by every other standard. In many respects, the decadent rich are themselves their own chief victims. Slaves to pride and avarice, they are unable to enjoy the most basic and most important blessings of life: covenant faithfulness in marriage, joyful harmony in the home, godly contentedness, wholesome purpose and satisfaction, the ability to enjoy life and the courage to face death. This is why the rates of depression and suicide are highest in the most affluent sectors: those who live for money, pride, and greed increasingly find it impossible to live at all.

#### WHAT KIND OF PREACHING?

For this reason, Micah suggests that the most telling indicator of your spiritual condition is revealed by your answer to this question: What kind of preaching does your heart crave: soft and false, or hard and true? Micah’s most pointed condemnation of the people of his day reviles them for the choice they would make: “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!” (Mic. 2:11).

This is the kind of preaching the hell-bound world delights to hear. First, Micah derides it as “wind and lies.” It is just so much empty noise, for all the smiling charm and smooth eloquence with which it is delivered. Worse than empty, it is “lies.” Smooth preaching falsifies God’s Word even as it quotes selected Bible verses for its message of cheap grace. Micah mocks such preaching as saying, “I will preach to you of wine and strong drink.” Probably the best way to render this today is “wine and beer preaching.” His point is not that it promotes alcoholism, but that it promotes a good time in general. “Eat, drink, and be merry!” it extols. “All is well, and no matter what evil we

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<sup>7</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah*, 298.

work in God's sight, we will still have a good time! Do not fear God's judgment: God is a God of love."

Is this the kind of preaching you prefer? The apostle Paul wrote of another kind of preaching, to which you would do better to listen. Summarizing his ministry in Ephesus, he said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). By that he meant the teaching that God is love and that God is light, permitting no evil at all. He meant the teaching of God's judgment on sin, as well as God's provision for sinners by sending his Son to atone for the sins of those who trust in him with his own precious blood. Paul meant the teaching of sanctification, by which believers are called to "put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:22-24).

We hear it said, "You are what you eat." Far more profoundly is the truth that you are what you hear. Soft preaching makes hard hearts, and hearts hardened by sin will perish under God's wrath. But hard preaching that teaches what need to hear, whole teaching that presents both judgment and deliverance, mercy and wrath, forgiveness and repentance, leads to soft hearts that receive the salvation of the God of truth and love.