

Micah on Peace and War

Based on commentary by John Calvin¹

Micah 4:3 “And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.”

The Gospel of Christ transforms societies from crime, violence and war to gentleness, kindness, love, and peace. The Gospel transforms greedy, self-loving takers and thieves, into self-denying givers and servants (Ephesians 4:28).

The Prophet here describes **the fruit of Divine truth—that God would restore all nations to such gentleness, that they would study to cultivate fraternal peace among themselves**, and that all would consult the good of others, having laid aside every desire for doing harm. As then he has lately showed, that the Church of God could not be otherwise formed than by the Word, and that the legitimate worship of God cannot be set up and continued, except where God is honored with the obedience of faith; so now he shows that Divine truth produces this effect—that they, who before lived in enmity towards one another and burned with the lust of doing harm, being full of cruelty and avarice [greed], will now, having their disposition changed, devote themselves wholly to acts of kindness. . . .

He afterward adds, with respect to the fruit, *They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks*. I have already briefly explained the meaning of the Prophet: he in fact shows that when the nations should be taught by the word of God, there would be such a change, that **every one would study to do good**, and to **perform the duties of love towards his neighbors**. But by speaking of swords and spears he briefly intimates, what **men, until they are made gentle by the word of the Lord, are ever intent on iniquitous tyranny and oppression**; nor can it be otherwise, while every one follows his own nature; for there are none who are not wedded to their own advantages, and the cupidity [covetousness] of men is insatiable.

As then all are thus intent on gain, while every one is **blinded by self-love**, what but cruelty must ever break forth from this wicked principle? Hence then it is, that men cannot cultivate peace with one another; for every one seeks to be the first and draws everything to himself; no one will willingly give way: then dissensions arise, and from dissensions, fightings. This is what the Prophet intimates. And then he adds, that **the fruit of the doctrine of Christ would however be such, that men, who were before like cruel wild beasts, would become gentle and meek**. *Forge then shall they their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks*.

Jesus, the Prince of Peace, offers peace and love to a hostile world (Isaiah 9:6).

Raise, he says, *shall not a nation a sword against a nation, and accustom themselves they shall no more to war*. He explains here more fully what I have before said—that **the Gospel of Christ would be to the nations, as it were, a standard of peace**: as when a banner is raised up, soldiers engage in battle, and their fury is kindled; so Micah ascribes a directly opposite office to **the Gospel of Christ—that it will restore those to the cultivation of peace and concord, who before were given to acts of hostility**.

¹ From John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. III, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 259-266, emphasis added and English modernized.

For when he says, 'Raise a sword shall not a nation against nation,' he means, as I have already stated, that **wherever Christ does not reign, men are wolves to men, for every one is disposed to devour all others.** Hence as men are naturally impelled by so blind an impulse, the Prophet declares, that this madness cannot be corrected, that men will not cease from wars, that they will not abstain from hostilities, until Christ becomes their teacher . . . he implies that it is a practice which ever prevails among mankind, that they contend with one another, that they are ever prepared to do injuries and wrongs, except when they put off their natural disposition. But from **where does gentleness proceed? Even from the teaching of the Gospel.**

Christians exercise mutual love and benevolence; we were born again in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared beforehand for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).

This passage ought to be remembered; for **we here learn, that there is not growing among us the real fruit of the Gospel, unless we exercise mutual love and benevolence, and exert ourselves in doing good.**

Though the Gospel is at this day purely preached among us, when yet we consider how little progress we make in **brotherly love**, we ought justly to be ashamed of our indolence [laziness]. God proclaims daily that He is reconciled to us in His Son; Christ testifies, that He is our peace with God, that He renders Him propitious to us, for this end, that we may live as brethren together. We indeed wish to be deemed the children of God, and we wish to enjoy the reconciliation obtained for us by the blood of Christ; but in the meantime we tear one another, we sharpen our teeth, our dispositions are cruel. If then we desire really to prove ourselves to be the disciples of Christ, we must attend to this part of divine truth, **each of us must strive to do good to his neighbors.**

But this cannot be done without being opposed by our flesh; for **we have a strong propensity to self-love**, and are inclined to seek too much our own advantages. We must therefore put off these inordinate and sinful affections, that brotherly kindness may succeed in their place.

We are also reminded that it is not enough for any one to refrain from doing harm, unless he be also **occupied in doing good to his brethren.** The Prophet might indeed have said only They shall break their swords and their spears; so that they shall hereafter abstain from doing any hurt to others: this only is not what he says; but, "They shall forge," or beat, "their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks;" that is, when they shall abstain from all injuries **they will seek to exercise themselves in the duties of love**, consistently with what Paul says, when he exhorts those who had stolen to steal no more, but to work with their own hands, that they might relieve others (Ephesians 4:28).

Except then we endeavor to relieve the necessities of our brethren, and to offer them assistance, there will not be in us but one part of true conversion, as the case is with many, who are not indeed inhuman, who commit no plunder, who give no occasion for complaint, but **they live to themselves, and enjoy unprofitable leisure.** This indolence the Prophet here indirectly condemns, when he speaks of the plowshares and the pruning hooks. . . .

The church of Christ remains a small remnant in many times and places.

Because the Prophet speaks here only of the disciples of Christ. He shows the fruit of his doctrine, that wherever it strikes a living root, it brings forth fruit: but **the doctrine of the Gospel strikes roots hardly in one out of a hundred.** The measure also of its progress must

be taken to the account; for so far as any one embraces the doctrine of the Gospel, so far **he becomes gentle and seeks to do good to his neighbors**. But as we as yet carry about us the relics of sin in our flesh, and as our knowledge of the Gospel is not yet perfect, it is no wonder, that not one of us has up until now completely laid aside the depraved and sinful affections of his flesh.

On account of mankind's sin, war and law enforcement are unavoidable and forever a necessary reality in this world.

It is also easy from this to see **how foolish is the conceit of those who seek to take away the use of the sword on account of the Gospel**. The Anabaptists, we know, have been turbulent, as though all civil order were inconsistent with the kingdom of Christ, as though the kingdom of Christ was made up of doctrine only, and that doctrine without any influence.

We might indeed do without the sword, were we angels in this world; but the number of the godly, as I have already said, is small; it is therefore necessary that the rest of the people should be restrained by a strong bridle; for the children of God are found mixed together, either with cruel monsters or with wolves and rapacious men. Some are indeed openly rebellious; others are hypocrites. The use of the sword will therefore continue to the end of the world.