

Micah on True and False Prophets

Based on commentary by John Calvin¹

Micah 2:6 “Prophesy ye not, say *they to them* that prophesy: they shall not prophesy to them, *that* they shall not take shame.”

The world and false teachers seek to silence God’s true prophets.

. . . If any understands, *they will prophesy*, or speak, of the Jews, then the Prophet points out their arrogance in daring to contend with God’s prophets, and in trying to silence and force them to submission. We indeed find that *ungodly men act thus, when they wish to take away the liberty of teaching from God’s prophets*; for they resist as though they themselves were doubly and trebly prophets. So also in this place, *Prophesy ye not*, that is, the Jews say, Let not the servants of God prophesy. But some think that a relative is understood, *Prophesy ye not* for them who prophesy; as though he had said, that ungodly men would not bear God’s prophets and thus would prevent and restrain them, as much as they could, from speaking. Others make this distinction, *Prophesy ye not—they shall prophesy*; as though the Jews said the first, and God the second. *Prophesy ye not*—this was the voice of *the ungodly and rebellious people, who would cast away from them and reject every instruction*: but God on the other side opposed them and said, *No, they shall prophesy*; ye forbid, but it is not in your power; I have sent them: though ye may rage and glamour a hundred times, it is My will that they should proceed in their course.

We hence see how various are the explanations: and even in the other part of the verse there is no more agreement between interpreters: *They shall not prophesy*; respecting this clause, it is sufficiently evident, that *God here means that there would be now an end to all prophecies*. How so? Because *He would not render His servants a sport, and subject them to reproach*. This is the true meaning: and yet some take another view, as though the Prophet continued his sentence, *They shall not prophesy*, lest the people should receive reproaches; for the ungodly think, that if they close the mouths of the prophets, all things would be lawful to them, and that their crimes would be hid, in short, that their vices would not be called to an account; as though their wickedness was not in itself sufficiently reproachful, were God to send no prophets, and no reproof given. *No doubt, profane men are so stupid as to think themselves free from every reproach, when God is silent*, and when they put away from themselves every instruction. Hence some think, that this passage is to be understood in this sense.

But I consider the meaning to be that which I have stated; for he had before said, *Prophesy ye not who prophesy*; that is, Ye prophets, be no longer troublesome to us; why do you stun our ears? We can no longer bear your boldness; be then silent. Thus he expressly introduced the Jews as speaking with authority, as though it was in their power to restrain the prophets from doing their duty.

God exercises His judgment when He takes away true prophets and silences them.

Now follows, as I think, the answer of God, *They shall not prophesy*, that He may not get reproaches: Since I see that *My doctrine is intolerable to you*, since I find a loathing so great and so shameful, I will take away My prophets from you. I will therefore rest and be hereafter silent. — Why? “Because I effect nothing; no, I subject My prophets to reproaches; for they lose their labor in speaking, they pour forth words which produce no fruit; for ye are altogether irreclaimable. No, as they are reproachfully treated by you, their condition is worse than if they

¹ From John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. III, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 193-235, emphasis added and English modernized.

were covered with all the disgrace of having been criminal. Since then I subject My prophets to reproach I will not allow them to be thus mocked by you. They shall therefore give over; they shall prophesy no longer.”

But the Lord could not have threatened the Jews with anything worse or more dreadful than with this immunity—that they should no more hear anything which might disturb them: for it is *an extreme curse*, when God gives us loose reins, and suffers us, with unbridled liberty, to rush as it were headlong into evils, as though He had delivered us up to Satan to be his slaves. Since it is so, let us be assured that it is an awful threatening, when he says, *They shall not prophesy*, lest they should hereafter become objects of reproach.

PRAYER.

Grant, Almighty God, that as You are pleased to try our patience by requiring mutual justice and the offices of love and benevolence—O grant, that we may not be wolves one to another, but show ourselves to be really Your children, by observing all those duties of justice and kindness which You command, and thus follow what is right and just through the whole course of our life, that we may at length enjoy that blessedness which is laid up for us in heaven, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

LECTURE EIGHTY-FOUR

MICAH 2:7 “O thou that art named the house of Jacob, is the spirit of the LORD straitened [restricted]? are these His doings? do not my words do good to him that walketh uprightly?”

The rebellious seek to restrict the speech of God’s true prophets and ban the teaching of true religion and right doctrine.

The Prophet now reproves the Israelites with greater severity, because *they attempted to impose a law on God and on His prophets and would not endure the free course of instruction*. He told us in the last verse, that the Israelites were inflated with so much presumption, that they wished to make terms with God: “Let him not prophesy” they said, as though it were in the power of man to rule God: and the Prophet now repeats, *Is the Spirit of the LORD restricted?* as though he said, Ye see the intent of your presumption, and how far it proceeds; for ye wish to subject God’s Spirit to yourselves and to your own pleasure. The prophets doubtless did not speak of themselves, but by the bidding and command of God. Since then the prophets were the organs of the Holy Spirit, *whoever attempted to silence them, usurped to himself an authority over God Himself*, and in a manner tried to make captive His Spirit: for what power can belong to the Spirit, except He be at liberty to reprove the vices of men, and condemn whatever is opposed to God’s justice? When this is taken away, there is no more any jurisdiction left to the Holy Spirit. We now then see what the Prophet means in this place: He shows how mad a presumption it was in the Israelites to attempt to impose silence on the prophets, as though they had a right to rule the Spirit of God, and to force Him to submission.

Is the Spirit of the LORD restricted? And this mode of speaking ought to be noticed, for it possesses no ordinary emphasis; inasmuch as the Prophet, by this reproof; recalls the attention of these perverse men to the author of his teaching; as though he had said, that the wrong was not done to men, that war was not carried on with them, when instruction is prohibited, *but that God is robbed of His own rights and that His liberty is taken away*, so that He is not allowed to execute His judgment in the world by the power of His Spirit.

In rejecting God’s true prophets, the Israelites proved themselves to be false believers.

And farther, the Prophet here ironically reproves the Israelites, when he says, *You who are named the house of Jacob, is the Spirit of the LORD restricted?* For if heathens, who have never known the teaching of religion, and to whom no heavenly mysteries have been revealed, had said, that they would have nothing to do with the prophets, it would have been much more endurable; for what wonder would it be for ignorant men to repudiate all instruction? But it was monstrous for the Israelites, who gloried in the name of God, to dare to rise up so rebelliously against the prophets: they always boasted of their own race, as though they surpassed all the rest of the world, and were a holy nation separated from all others.

Hence the Prophet says, "Ye wish to be called the house of Jacob; what is your excellency and dignity, except that you have been chosen by God to be His peculiar people? If then you have been habituated to the teaching of God, what fury and madness it is, that you cannot bear His prophets, but wish to close their mouths?" We now then see the point of this irony, when the Prophet says that they were *called the house of Jacob*.

He seems at the same time to suggest, in an indirect way, that they were a spurious race. As they were called by other prophets, Amorites and Sodomites: even so in this place the Prophet says, "Ye are indeed the house of Jacob, but it is only as to the name." They were in reality so *degenerated*, that they falsely pretended the name of the holy patriarch; yes, they falsely and mendaciously boasted of their descent from holy men, though they were nothing else but as it were rotten members. Inasmuch then as they had so departed from the religion of Abraham and of other fathers, the Prophet says, "You are indeed called what you are not."

He afterwards adds, *Are these His works?* Here he brings the Israelites to the proof, as though he said, *How comes it, that the prophets are so troublesome and grievous to you, except that they sharply reprove you, and denounce on you the judgment of God?* But God is in a manner forced, except He was to change His nature, to treat you thus sharply and severely. Ye boast that you are His people, but how do you live? *Are these His works?* that is, *do you lead a life and form your conduct according to the law laid down by Him?* But as your life does not in any degree correspond with what God requires, it is no wonder that the prophets handle you so roughly. For God remains the same, ever like Himself; but ye are perfidious, and have wholly repudiated the covenant He has made with you. Then this asperity [severity], of which ye are accustomed to complain, ought not to be deemed unjust to you.

He then subjoins, *Are not my words good to him who walks uprightly?* Here the Prophet more distinctly shows, why he had before asked whether their works were those of the Lord; for *he compares their life with the doctrine*, which on account of its severity displeased them; they said that the words of the prophets were *too rigid*. *God here answers, that His words were gentle and kind, and therefore pleasant, that is, to the pious and good;* and that hence the fault was in them, when He treated them less kindly than they wished.

The meaning of the whole then is, that *the word of God*, as it brings life and salvation to man, *is in its own nature gracious, and cannot be either bitter, or hard, or grievous to the pious and the good*, for God unfolds in it the riches of His goodness.

We hence see that God here repudiates the impious calumny [slander] that was cast on His word; as though He had said, that the complaints which prevailed among the people were false; for they transferred the blame of their own wickedness to the word of God. ***They said that God was too severe: but God here declares that He was gentle and kind***, and that the character of His word was the same, provided men were tractable [teachable], and did not, through their perverseness, extort from Him anything else than what He of Himself wished.

And the same thing David means in Psalm 18, when he says that God is perverse with the perverse: for in that passage he means, that he had experienced the greatest goodness from God, inasmuch as he had rendered himself docile and obedient to Him. On the contrary, he says, *God is perverse with the perverse*; that is, when He sees men obstinately resisting and hardening their necks, He then puts on as it were a new character, and deals perversely with them, that is, severely, as their stubbornness deserves; as for a hard knot, according to a common proverb, a hard wedge is necessary.

We now then perceive the meaning of this passage, that *God's words are good to those who walk uprightly*; that is they breathe the sweetest odor, and bring nothing else but true and real joy: for when can there be complete happiness, except when God embraces us in the bosom of His love? But the testimony respecting this love is brought to us by His word. *The fault then is in us, and ought to be imputed to us, if the word of God is not delightful to us.*

Micah 2:11 “If a man walking in the spirit and falsehood do lie, saying, I will prophesy unto thee of wine and of strong drink; he shall even be the prophet of this people.”

[The NIV paraphrase conveys the sense of the passage: “If a liar and deceiver comes and says, ‘I will prophesy for you plenty of wine and beer,’ he would be just the prophet for this people!”]

Unbelievers want to be soothed by the deceptive speech of flattering false teachers.

The Prophet points out here another vice by which the people were infected — that *they wished to be soothed with flatteries*: for all the ungodly think that they are in a manner exempt from God's judgment, when they hear no reproof; yes they think themselves happy, when they get flatterers, who are indulgent to their vices. This is now the disease which the Prophet discovers as prevailing among the people. . . .

If a man walks in the spirit, and deceitfully lies, etc. Almost all interpreters agree in this—that to walk in the spirit, is to announce any thing proudly and presumptuously; and they take spirit for wind or for deceits. But I doubt not, but that to walk in the spirit was then a common mode of speaking, to set forth the exercise of the prophetic office. When therefore any one was a Prophet, or one who discharged that office, or sustained the character of a teacher, he professed himself to have been sent from above.

False teachers offer the people what they want (such as an abundance of wine and beer). True preachers tell the people what God wants them to hear, whether they want to hear it or not.

The Prophets were indeed formerly called the men of the spirit, and for this reason, because they adduced nothing from themselves or from their own heads; but only delivered faithfully, as from hand to hand, what they had received from God. To walk in the spirit then means, in my view, the same thing as to profess the office of a teacher. When therefore any one professed the office of a teacher, what was he to do? “If I,” says Micah, “being endued with the Spirit, and called to teach, wished to ingratiate myself with you, and preached that there would be an abundant increase of wine and strong drink, all would applaud me; for if any one promises these things, he becomes *the prophet of this people.*”

Unbelievers want to be flattered and affirmed in their vices; they desire to be deceived; they do not want honest and faithful teachers.

In short, *Micah intimates that the Israelites rejected all sound doctrine, for they sought nothing but flatteries, and wished to be cherished in their vices; yes, they desired to be deceived by*

false adulation to their own ruin. It hence appears that they were not the people they wished to be deemed, that is, the people of God: for the first condition in God's covenant was—that He should rule among His people. **Inasmuch then as these men would not endure to be governed by Divine power, and wished to have full and unbridled liberty, it was the same as though they had banished God far from them.** Hence, by this proof, the Prophet shows that they had wholly departed from God, and had no intercourse with Him.

If there be then any man walking in the spirit, let him, he says, keep far from the truth; for he will not otherwise be borne by this people. — How so? Because they will not have honest and faithful teachers. What is then to be done? Let flatterers come, and promise them plenty of wine and strong drink, and they will be their best teachers, and be received with great applause: in short, the suitable teachers of that people were the ungodly; the people could no longer bear the true Prophets; their desire was to have flatterers who were indulgent to all their corruptions.

PRAYER.

Grant, Almighty God, that since we cannot otherwise really profit by Your word, than by having all our thoughts and affections subjected to You, and offered to You as a sacrifice—O grant, that we may suffer You, by the sound of Your word, so to pierce through everything within us, that being dead in ourselves, we may live to You, and never suffer flatteries to become our ruin, but that we may, on the contrary, patiently endure reproofs, however bitter they may be, only let them serve to us as medicine, by which our inward vices may be cleansed, until at length being thoroughly cleansed and formed into new creatures, we may, by a pious and holy life, really glorify Your name, and be received into that celestial glory, which has been purchased for us by the blood of thy only-begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Micah 3:8: “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.”

False teachers appeal to their large number of followers and the size of their congregations. Their popularity serves as a shield to deflect all criticism of their false teachings. True prophets are willing to stand unwaveringly and unabashedly for the truth, even if it means that they must stand alone and that few if any will listen or believe what they say.

Here **Micah**, in a courageous spirit, **stands up alone against all the false teachers** even when he saw that they were a large number, and that they appealed to their number, according to their usual practice, as their shield. Hence he says, *I am filled with power by the Spirit of Jehovah [Yahweh]. This confidence is what all God's servants should possess*, that they may not succumb to the empty and vain boastings of those who subvert the whole order of the Church. Whenever then, God permits His pure truth to be corrupted by false teachers, and them to be popular among those high in honor, as well as the multitude, let this striking example be remembered by us, lest we be discouraged, lest the firmness and invincible power of the Holy Spirit be weakened in our hearts, but that we may proceed in the course of our calling, and learn to oppose the name of God to all the deceptions of men, if indeed we are convinced that our service is approved by Him, as being faithful.

Since, then, *Micah* says, that he was *filled with power*, he no doubt stood, as it were, in the presence of the whole people, and alone *pitched his camp against the whole multitude*; for there were then false teachers going about everywhere, as the devil sows always seed enough, whenever God lets loose the reins. Though then their number was not small, yet Micah hesitated not to go forth among them. . . . “Ye despise me, being one man, and ye despise a few men; ye may think that I alone serve the Lord; but I am a match for a thousand, yes, for an

innumerable multitude; for God is on my side, and He approves of my ministry as it is from Him, nor do I bring anything to you but what He has commanded: It is then I." . . .

False teachers are proud and fierce fighters for Satan's kingdom of lies and falsehood. True Christians must discern between the true and the false.

He afterwards adds, *By the Spirit of Jehovah*. Here the Prophet casts aside every suspicious token of arrogance; lest he should seem to claim anything as his own, he says, that this power was conferred on him from above: and this circumstance ought to be particularly noticed. Though Micah rightly and justly claimed to himself the name of a teacher, he yet had nothing different from others before the world; for all his opponents discharged the same office, and obtained the same honor: the office was common to both parties. Micah was either alone, or connected with Isaiah and a few others. Since then he here dares to set up himself, we see that his call alone must be regarded; for **we know how great is the propensity of Satan to oppose the kingdom of Christ, and also how proud and fierce are false teachers.**

Since then the rage of Satan is well known and the presumption of false teachers, there is no reason why the faithful should make much of mere naked titles: and when they, who lived at that time, declared, as Papists do at this day, that *they had no discrimination* nor judgment to know, which of them ought to have been deemed impostors or the ministers of God, inasmuch as Micah was alone and they were many, and also that the others were prophets that at least they had the name and reputation of being so—what was to be done?

This was the reason why I have said that this circumstance was worthy of special notice—that though their vocation was common, yet as they had acted perfidiously [deceitfully], and Micah alone, or with few others, had faithfully performed what the Lord had commanded, *he alone is to be deemed a Prophet and a teacher*: in short, there is no reason for false prophets to set up against us a mere covering, when they cannot prove that they are endued with the Spirit of God.

Whoever then desires to be deemed a servant of God, and a teacher in His Church, must have this seal which Micah here adduces; he must be endued with the Spirit of God; honor then will be given to God. But if any one brings nothing but the name, we see how vain before God it is.

He afterwards subjoins *With judgment and courage*. By judgment, I have no doubt, he understands *discernment*, as this is also the common meaning of the word. He then adds *courage*. **These two things are especially necessary for all ministers of the word**, — that is, to excel in **wisdom**, to understand what is true and right, and to be also endued with inflexible **firmness**, by which they may overcome both Satan and the whole world, and never turn aside from their course, though the devil may in all ways assail them. We hence see what these two words import. . . .

Micah divides this power of the prophets into two kinds, even into wisdom or judgment, and into courage; and he did this, that they might understand what God intended: Let them excel in doctrine; and then that they may be confirmed, let them not yield to any gales that may blow, nor be overcome by threats and terrors; let them not bend here and there to please the world; in a word, let them not succumb to any corruptions: it is therefore necessary to add courage to judgment.

True prophets do not seek popularity or the people's approval for their teachings. True prophets reprove and threaten the unbelieving and hypocritical, expose their crimes and vices, and publicly proclaim God's condemnation against the unrepentant and rebellious.

He then adds, *To declare to Jacob his wickedness, and to Israel his sin.* We here see that the Prophet did not hunt for the favor of the people. Had he courted their approval, he must have soothed with flatteries those who sought flatteries and were already seized with such hatred and malignant feelings that they had rejected Micah. He must then have spoken softly to them to please them; but this he did not do.

“On the one hand,” he says, “these men [the false prophets] sell to you their blessings and deceive you with the hope of peace; and, on the other, they denounce war, except their voracity is satisfied; and thus it is that they please you; for so ye wish, and ye seek such teachers as will promise you wine and strong drink: but I am sent to you for another purpose; for the Lord has not deposited flatteries with me, such as may be pleasant to you; but He has deposited reproofs and threatenings. *I shall therefore uncover your crimes, and will not hesitate to condemn you before the whole world, for ye deserve to be thus treated.*” We now perceive why the Prophet says, that he was endued with power to *declare his wickedness to Jacob, etc.*

True teachers must not only teach faithfully what God commands but also they must expose falsehood.

But we hence learn how necessary it is for us to be supported by celestial firmness, when we have to deal with insincere and wicked men; and this is almost the common and uniform lot of all God’s servants; for all who are sent to teach the word are sent to carry on a contest. *It is therefore not enough to teach faithfully what God commands, except we also contend:* and though the wicked may violently rise up against us, we must yet put on a brazen front, as it is said in Ezekiel 3:8, 9; nor must we yield to their fury, but preserve invincible firmness. Since then we have a contest with the devil, with the world, and with all the wicked, that we may faithfully execute our office, we must be furnished with this courage of which Micah speaks.

True Christians are able to judge and discern between good and evil. No one who desires truly and from the heart to obey God will be deceived, for the Lord always gives His chosen people the spirit of judgment and discernment. Never be deceived by worldly accolades, degrees, titles, and popularity; the road to heaven is the narrow way (Matthew 7:13-14).

As I have already shown that God’s servants ought courageously to break through all those obstacles by which Satan may attempt either to delay or to force them backward; so also the doctrine taught here ought to be applied to *all the godly: they ought wisely to distinguish between the faithful servants of God and impostors who falsely pretend His name.* Then no one, who desires truly and from the heart to obey God, will be deceived; for the Lord will ever give *the spirit of judgment and discrimination.*

And the reason why at this day many miserable souls are led to endless ruin is, because they either shut their eyes, or willfully dissemble, or designedly involve themselves in such subterfuges as these—“I cannot form any judgment; I see on both sides learned and celebrated men, at least those who are in some repute and esteem: some call me to the right hand, and others to the left, where am I to go? I therefore prefer to close my mouth and my ears.” Thus many, seeking a cloak for their sloth, often manifest their ignorance: for we see that the eyes must be opened when the Lord exercises and tries our faith: and He suffers discords and contentions to arise in the Church that some may choose this, and others that.

Though God then relaxes the reins of Satan, that contests and turmoils of this kind may be excited in the Church, there is yet no excuse for us, if we follow not what the Lord prescribes; for He will ever guide us by His Spirit, provided we foster not our own slothfulness.

Micah 3:11-12: “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? 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.”

True pastors feed the Lord’s flock by proclaiming the doctrine of salvation. False pastors facilitate humanly-devised ceremonies and drama skits.

. . . For though it be quite evident for what reason pastors were appointed to preside over the Church, we yet see that all who *proudly* call themselves pastors are dumb dogs. From where does this arise? Because they think that they discharge their duties, by being only attentive to ceremonies; and they have more than enough to occupy them: for the priestly office under the Papacy is laborious enough as to trifles and scenic performances (stage-playing rites) but at the same time they neglect the principal thing—to feed the Lord’s flock with the doctrine of salvation. Thus degenerated had the priests become under the Law. What is said by Malachi ought to have been perpetuated—that the law should be in the mouth of the priest, that he should be the messenger and interpreter of the God of hosts (Malachi 2:7). . . .

Religious hypocrites and corrupt churches love external forms of religion but lack true piety. Protestants and Reformed Presbyterians should examine themselves closely before they judge others for their hypocrisies. Jesus said, “And why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3).

. . . It has, we know, been a common wickedness almost in all ages, and it greatly prevails at this day—that men are satisfied with having only the outward evidences of being the people of God. There was then indeed an altar erected by the command of God; there were sacrifices made according to the rule of the Law; and there were also great and illustrious promises respecting that kingdom. Since then the sacrifices were daily performed, and since the kingdom still retained its outward form, they thought that God was, in a manner, bound to them.

The same is the case at this day with the great part of men; they presumptuously and absurdly boast of the external forms of religion.

The Papists possess the name of a Church, with which they are extremely inflated; and then there is a great show and pomp in their ceremonies.

The hypocrites also among us boast of Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper, and the name of Reformation; while, at the same time, these are nothing but mockeries, by which the name of God and the whole of religion are profaned, when no real piety flourishes in the heart.

This was the reason why Micah now expostulated with the prophets and the priests, and the king’s counselors; it was, because they falsely pretended that they were the people of God.