

St. Paul in 2 Timothy talks about a time that is coming when people will not endure sound teaching. They will have itching ears, accumulating for themselves teachers to suit their own passions. They will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. But the saddest thing about it, Christians, is that they will believe that they are in fact doing the right thing. They will believe that they are still following after God. But they will be listening to their false teachers, who only tell them what they want to hear. And if we want to know what this actually looks like, how this actually will play out, we have many examples in the Scriptures, including our Old Testament reading for today with the book of Micah. We can see what it means to wander away from the truth by listening to what Micah has to say.

Because the prophet Micah, when he was a child, lived in the days of King Uzziah, also known as Azariah. And King Uzziah lived during a very prosperous time. God had made him prosper in everything: in victory, in trade, in influence. All of it was going very, very well. In fact, we are told, 2 Chronicles chapter 26: "He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who instructed him in the fear of God, and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him prosper." It was a very good time to be alive in the land of Israel! But the people also prospered along with him. There were many who became wealthy in that time because of all the money that was coming into the land. It was a time of great luxury and wealth, a time of expansion and growth, a very good time to be in Israel!

But unfortunately, Christians, like every time of prosperity, there were some who prospered more than others. And there were some who abused their prosperity to get more and more for themselves. They exploited the poor by taking away their lands from them, forcing them to take deals that they knew they would not be able to repay, doing whatever they could to get all of these things for themselves. Micah himself describes what's happening earlier in this chapter when he says in verse 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." And so because of that, even though it was a time of great wealth, it was also a time of great greed in the land of Israel.

Greed, of course, by itself is bad enough, but greed among God's people was worse still. Because you have to understand, Christians, that land was their connection to God. That's why it's called the Promised Land, after all. As long as they had an inheritance in the land, they would know that they were indeed God's people. That's why if you read the Old Testament, for example, there are so many laws about keeping an inheritance within the family, making sure that it stays in the same family from generation to generation. And it's also why Naboth, a century before Micah lived, resisted King Ahab when he tried to take his land. He says in 1 Kings chapter 21: "The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my fathers!" No land meant no inheritance. No inheritance meant no share in Israel. And no share in Israel meant that they were effectively cut off from God. So this greed and this land grabbing was especially evil, because it was cutting the poor off from their inheritance, making it seem as if they had been cut off from God.

But what made it the worst, Christians, was that these people believed they were doing the right thing. They believed that they were still, in fact, God's people, even though they had done all of these things. After all, they still had their inheritance. They still had land. They had not been cut off. And did not all of this wealth that was coming to them show that God was blessing them? Didn't it show that, because they were rich, they had his favor? How many promises had God

made that he would always be their God? They didn't think they were in any kind of danger at all. They had become the worst kind of hypocrite, the hypocrite who does not know that he is a hypocrite.

But they also accumulated teachers for themselves, teachers who told them what they wanted to hear, teachers who taught them half-truths, teachers who distorted God's word, teachers who made them comfortable, gave them a very comfortable religion. In fact, it was so comfortable that it didn't bother them at all when they sinned against the Lord.

But they were so comfortable, Christians, they also spoke against Micah. We hear what they say in verse 6 of our reading: "'Do not preach'—thus they preach— 'one should not preach of such things; disgrace will not overtake us.'" Don't tell us that God is going to judge us, they said! There will be no disaster. There will be no disgrace. You are lying, Micah! Because has not God promised that he would always be our God? Listen to what he says in his Word. Deuteronomy chapter 26, for example, "And the Lord has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you." God said it! It is absolutely true. And God keeps his promises. God is a God who is patient and long-suffering. God is a God who is a stronghold and a faithful father. God will never leave us or forsake us. Here's the chapter and verse. I can point to it right in the Scriptures! So how can you, Micah, say otherwise? How can you say that God is against us, when it seems so clear that he's actually for us?

Yes, Christians, it is true. God does say these things. And all of the things that God says in his Word are absolutely true. But if we stop right there, we are left with a half-truth. And a half-truth is always comfortable. A half-truth does not demand anything of us. A half-truth is something that we want to hear. And believing in a half-truth, Christians, will lead us to reject the truth, just as was happening in Micah's day. They thought that they were God's people, no matter what they did, and that led them into very great sin. They thought that they were God's people, no matter what, and that turned them into common highway robbers, the kind of men who robbed travelers as they're passing by. They would drive women out of their homes, taking the inheritance away from children, and thinking that they were doing the right thing the entire time! And they also rejected Micah, calling him a liar and a false teacher, even though he was the only one who was telling them the truth.

This is why Micah says in verse 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!" You'd listen to him, Micah says. A man who'd preach what you wanted to hear, promising free wine, great prosperity, no responsibilities in the world. And you would think that it was the truth, even as it led you into disaster. But not me, says Micah. I have come to tell you the whole truth, so listen to what I have to say before judgment falls upon you and it is too late!

Christians, beware of half-truths. Just because something makes you feel good doesn't mean that it's true. God's Word was not given to us to lead us into sin, and God's Word was not given for us so that we might have an excuse for our sins, ever. Let's take an example just so that we understand what this means. Paul in the book of Romans says very clearly that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And that is a glorious truth. That is the foundation of our faith. That is something that we should hold on to with all of our might, to know that God loves

us, not because of what we have done, but because of what his Son has done for us. That's absolutely true. But if we were to stop there and to go nowhere else in the Scriptures, it would become a half-truth. Because I could take that and so easily twist to make it sound like that means it doesn't really matter what I do. It doesn't matter how I live. Jesus is going to forgive me anyway. And it would lead us into sin. But that's not true, Christians. This truth changes who we are. It changes how we live as Christians. So that Paul himself in the same book later on, Romans chapter 12, can say, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." So being saved by faith does not mean that we are now free to sin, but it means that we are now free to walk in the ways of God, which leads us to everlasting life.

Take one more example, our epistle reading for today. When Paul is writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy, he's in prison. And he writes to him and says, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." Being poured out is not something that is comfortable. Neither is fighting or running a race. Being a Christian means that we may have to suffer many things for the sake of the kingdom. It may very well hurt to follow after Christ! But for the one who runs the race, God has laid up for him a crown of righteousness which will never fade away. We must avoid half-truths, Christians, and hold on to the whole truth of God!

So how do we do that? How do we avoid half-truths? First of all, we do it by being in the Word. Don't rely on what other people tell you about what the Word says. Be in it yourself. Read it for yourself. Spending time in the Word, becoming familiar with all of it, will go a very long way to helping us to avoid half-truths. The second thing we should do is to read everything that the Bible has to say together. Don't just focus on individual verses. When we focus just on a single verse, it's so easy for us to twist it into something that God does not mean to say. But when we read it in context, when we read it all together, that's a lot less likely to happen. The third thing that we should do is to listen to the hard things that God has to say. Don't just highlight the things that make you feel good. Listen to everything that God says, even when it's unpleasant to do so. Even when we have to examine ourselves and consider what we are doing. Because God has not just come to comfort us--although he has certainly come to do that as well--but to change us, to make us holy, and to make us like him in everything. And that is a good and a blessed thing. The last thing we should do, Christians, is to pray and to examine ourselves. To ask the hard questions, to be willing to look at ourselves in the cold, hard truth of reality. And when we do that, when we see ourselves for what we truly are, then we can pray to God that he would change us through Jesus Christ, that he can make us into something new. Doing all of these things, Christians, will help us to avoid half-truths, because we are called to turn to God, to listen to his voice in everything, to listen to his whole truth, because life comes through him alone!

Let us pray. Lord God, whose Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, strengthen us in the truth and give us teachers who speak the whole truth, so that we may walk in it unto life everlasting. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.