

Individual & Societal Responsibility for Unjust Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Micah 1, 3, 5, and Amos 5

Despite God's intentions, work is subjected to human sin. The most egregious case is work that is inherently sinful. Micah mentions prostitution, probably in this case cult prostitution, and he promises that the wages from it would be burned. A straightforward application of this would be to rule out prostitution as a legitimate occupation, even if it might be an understandable choice for those who have no other way to provide for themselves or their families. There are other jobs that also raise the question, should this job be done at all? We can all think of various examples, no doubt, and Christians would do well to seek work that benefits others and society as a whole.

But Micah is speaking to Israel as a whole, not only to individuals. He is critiquing a society in which social, economic, and religious conditions make prostitution viable. The question is not, "Is it acceptable to earn a living as a prostitute," but "How must society change to eliminate the need for anyone to do degrading or harmful work?" Micah calls to account not so much those who feel forced into doing bad work, but the leaders who fail to reform society. His words are scathing. "Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones" (Micah 3:1–2).

Our society is different from Micah's, and the specific remedies God promises to ancient Israel are not necessarily what God intends today. Micah's prophetic words reflect the connection between ritual prostitution and idolatrous cults in his day. God promises to end the social abuses centered at the cultic shrines. "I will cut off your images and your pillars from among you, and you shall bow down no more to the work of your hands; and I will uproot your sacred poles from among you and destroy your towns" (Micah 5:13–14). In our day, we need God's wisdom to find effective solutions to current social factors leading to sinful and oppressive work. At the same time, like the prophets of Israel, we need to call individuals to repent of wilfully engaging in sinful labour. "Seek good and not evil, that you may live, and so the Lord, the God of hosts will be with you."