

Justice and Equity

Calvin's 1550 Sermon on Micah 2:1¹

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Abstract

This paper examines a new English translation of John Calvin's sermon on Micah 2:1 by the author, and it explores the sermon's themes of justice and equity within Calvin's historical context of Geneva in 1550. An exploration of homiletical influences on the sermon includes consideration of Calvin's development of "plain sense" preaching. "Plain sense" preaching in Calvin's writing denotes a rhetorical and exegetical style that draws upon his careful study of John Chrysostom's sermons, and his attempt in his French-language 1541 Institutes to relate covenant theology to preaching of Old Testament texts. The judgments of the prophet Micah demand the same repentance from ancient Israel, sixteenth-century Geneva, and even contemporary bearers. The paper concludes with reflection on how Calvin's "plain sense" preaching speaks to matters of justice with respect to mistreatment of immigrants and refugees in a contemporary North American context.

Introduction

John Calvin preached through the book of Micah in late 1550 amid intense civic crises in Geneva. Plagues, threats of warfare with neighbors, and riots had threatened the order of the city throughout the 1540s. Evangelical refugees from France strained Geneva's resources for poor relief, and local political factions debated the enfranchisement of these new resident aliens.² The Company of Pastors, comprised predominantly of French evangelical refugees, rivaled the authority of local governing bodies as its ministers increasingly exerted control over Geneva's social mores and

¹ This paper examines a new English translation of Calvin's sermon on Micah 2:1. The bibliographical information for the French text of Calvin's sermon is included below, and I will refer to my English translation of the text in footnotes as Jean Calvin, Sermon on Micah 2:1, Scales Translation. References will be made to the paragraph sections of the manuscript in the appendix, not the page number of the Supplementa Calviniana [A.S.]

Jean Calvin, Du lundi 24^e Jour de Novembre 1550, in: Supplementa Calviniana: Sermons sur le Livre de Michée, vol. 5, ed. Jean Daniel Benoît, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany 1964, 36–44.

² *William G. Naphy*, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation, Louisville (KY) 2003, 137f.

public worship.³ On a Monday morning in November 1550 – in a city riven by divisions of rich and poor, exile and citizen – Calvin called his congregation to repentance with the words of Micah 2:1, arguing that God’s demands for “justice and equity”⁴ applied to their own lives and relationships.

Calvin’s sermons on Micah are robust examples of his commitment to preaching Scripture in a “plain sense” that (1) exposit and instruct listeners in the context of Micah’s circumstances, and (2) proclaims the text as God’s Word speaking to the immediate concerns of his Genevan congregation. Calvin’s appreciation for preaching the “plain sense” of Scripture matured during his exile in Strasbourg from 1538–1541, when he wrote a treatise on John Chrysostom’s merits as an exegete. Calvin abandoned his project of translating Chrysostom’s sermons into French, but he includes similar themes in a chapter about exegesis of the Old and New Testaments in his 1541 French edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Calvin’s “plain sense” style is a rhetorical commitment to making the ancient texts of the Old Testament come alive in contemporary context. As Calvin explains the meaning of Micah 2:1, he also speaks in the voice of Micah to contemporary Genevans, so that they might also hear and practicably obey God’s demand for justice and equity. He does not hold back his condemnation of wealthy and powerful listeners, or anyone who would amass wealth to the detriment of a neighbor. God’s demands for justice and God’s promises of redemption speak from God’s Word to ancient Israel through the contemporary preacher to anyone who has ears to hear.

This paper begins with an orientation to Calvin’s attitudes on “plain sense” exegesis and preaching in his writings on Chrysostom and the 1541 *Institutes*. What follows is a brief summary of the troubled circumstances of Geneva at the time Calvin preached on Micah. The paper then examines the theological themes and rhetorical devices of his sermon on Micah 2:1. I have translated the sermon manuscript from French, and so quotations of the sermon in English are my own. The conclusion offers some reflections on how Calvin’s preaching might speak to modern pastors who take up contemporary crises of justice and inequality in their own preaching ministries. With Calvin’s words in mind that “nothing is lacking for us to have abundance of every good,”⁵ let us begin!

³ Ibid, 84–86.

⁴ *Calvin*, Sermon on Micah 2:1, Scales Translation, §35b.

⁵ *John Calvin*, *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*, trans. Elsie Anne McKee, Grand Rapids (MI) 2009, 390.

1. An Examination of Calvin's Earlier Writings on Exegesis and the Old Testament

1.1 Calvin's preface to a French edition of Chrysostom's homilies

Calvin lived in Strasbourg for three years after his expulsion from Geneva as a young, French, evangelical preacher. During that time, he began and quickly abandoned an ambitious project to translate Chrysostom's sermons from Greek into French. All that remains of his efforts is the fragment of a prefatory essay on the merits of studying Chrysostom as an exegete and pastor of the Early Church. Translator W. Ian P. Hazlett suggests a date between 1538 and 1540 as the most probable period for authorship of the text.⁶

As a devoted student of John Chrysostom, Calvin considered the revival of exegetical preaching an indispensable tenet of Reformed theology and worship. Calvin expressed considerable admiration for Chrysostom's ability to blend his rhetorical brilliance with attention to the ordinary listener in the congregation. Young Calvin writes, "[Chrysostom] plainly adjusts both [his] approach and language as if he had the instruction of the common people in mind. This being the case, anyone maintaining that he ought to be kept in seclusion among the academics has got it wrong, seeing that he did go out of his way to cultivate a popular appeal."⁷ This proposed study of an ancient urban bishop – who preached exegetical sermons that also demanded action on behalf of the poor during famines and riots – reveals Calvin's interest for practical application as a preaching pastor with special concern for poor and marginalized people.⁸

Calvin admired that Chrysostom's sermons eschewed allegory, and instead offered an interpretation of Scripture that was intelligible for all his listeners. His enthusiasm for Chrysostom's preaching was so great that he wrote, "There is no one after Chrysostom who comes closer to the plain sense of Scripture."⁹ Calvin expounds further on his appreciation for a literal, rather than metaphorical, reading of Old Testament texts in his French edition of the *Institutes* from 1541. The value of a plain reading of the Old Testament is connected to Calvin's understanding of God's covenant between Israel and God's covenant with the Early Church being the same promise of salvation in Christ.

⁶ W. Ian P. Hazlett, Calvin's Latin Preface to His Proposed French Edition of Chrysostom's Homilies. Translation and Commentary, in: James Kirk (ed.), *Humanism and Reform. The Church in Europe, England, and Scotland, 1400–1643*, Cambridge (MA) 1991, 132.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁸ For further reading on Chrysostom's evocative representations of the poor in his sermons, see *Peter Brown, Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity. Towards a Christian Empire*, Madison (WI) 1992, especially 91ff.

⁹ Hazlett (note 6), 145.

1.2 The 1541 Institutes and Calvin's hermeneutic for the Old and New Testaments

The continuity of God's promises from Ancient Israel through the New Testament shaped Calvin's understanding of how pastors should read and preach the books of the Old Testament. In his 1541 edition of the *Institutes* in French, Calvin presented three "articles" of how a student of the Bible should understand the relationship and "unity" of the covenant:

First, that the Lord did not offer the Jews an earthly happiness or wealth as a goal to which they should aspire, but He adopted them into hope of immortality and revealed and testified this adoption to them by visions as well as by His law and prophets. Secondly, the covenant by which they were joined together with God was not founded on their merits but only on His mercy. Thirdly, they had and knew Christ as mediator by whom they were joined together with God and were made participants of his promises.¹⁰

God's covenant with Israel is the same covenant that the apostles shared because of Jesus Christ's mediation. The Old Testament, as Scripture that testifies to the same covenant, possesses an equal dignity and value as the New Testament for practical application in preaching. The pastor can preach about God's warnings and blessings in the Old Testament without a need for metaphorical interpretations or allegories about the inward spiritual journey. Sermons about Old Testament texts could speak to quotidian concerns of congregations with the plain sense that one might receive the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, or Paul's admonishments to the churches of Galatia or Corinth.

The words of the prophets offer more than poetic expressions about God or inspiration for allegory. A plain reading and preaching of their witness offers opportunities for practical application and spiritual edification just as much for Calvin and his congregation as it did for the people of Judah. Calvin explains that the prophets' words were meant both for the listener's earthly or practical context, as well as the cultivation of life with God:

Only I will exhort my readers to remember to use the key which I gave them to make the opening: that is, whenever the prophets speak of the blessedness of the faithful [of which there appears scarcely a small shadow in this world], let them return to this distinction: that the prophets gave earthly benefits as a figure or image of God's goodness to demonstrate it better, but at the same time by this picture they wanted to raise the people's hearts up above the earth and the elements of this world and this corruptible age, and to lead them to meditate on and practice for the happiness of the spiritual life.¹¹

¹⁰ *Calvin* (note 5), 386.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 400.

The blessings and benefits of this life teach the believer something about God. How someone responds to these blessings is a manner of practice that prepares and equips people for spiritual growth. This is not the same as allegory, in which images or symbols signify a greater spiritual truth; the blessings themselves are “the figure or image of God’s goodness” that give believers a glimpse of the fullness of God’s grace. God’s blessings offer people an opportunity to practice the Christian life amid a “corruptible age.”¹²

The chapter of the *1541 Institutes* named “Of the Similarities and Differences between the Old and New Testaments” and his treatment of patristic writers in his *Preface on Chrysostom* show that Calvin devoted considerable effort to preaching and developing theology from the Old Testament. His commitment to *lectio continua* evokes the ancient exegetes whom he names in his *Preface on Chrysostom*. He describes the exegetical preacher Cyril as “an outstanding exegete, and someone who among the Greeks can be rated second to Chrysostom.”¹³ On the other hand,

What Jerome wrote on the Old Testament has deservedly very little reputation among scholars. For he is almost completely bogged down in allegories, by which he distorts Scripture with too much license. [His] commentaries on the Gospel of Matthew and on two Epistles of Paul are tolerable, except that they savour of a man not sufficiently experienced in church affairs.¹⁴

During his sojourn in Strasbourg, Calvin reflected on the necessity of rigorous exegetical scholarship and considerable attention to the “church affairs” in which the pastor engaged every day. The young, French theologian in exile articulated profound concern about communication of the plain sense of God’s Word to the ordinary people of his time. When Calvin returned to Geneva from Strasbourg, his preaching career developed into a nearly all-consuming passion. The crises in Geneva related to the influx of refugees offer us insight into the contemporary concerns of Calvin’s preaching between his return to Geneva in 1541 until the delivery of his Micah sermons in 1550.

2. Conflicts Concerning the Refugee Crisis in Geneva, 1541–1550

Calvin left Geneva in 1538 because of his disagreements with the city’s policy of appeasement toward their threatening neighbor Berne. While he lived in Strasbourg, a party known as the Guillermins, opponents of the Berne-supporting *Articulants*, came into power in 1541, and Calvin

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Hazlett* (note 6), 144.

¹⁴ Ibid, 145.

was invited to return. He took up the task of composing a constitution for Geneva as a republic, and he organized a Company of Pastors made up predominantly of French refugees.¹⁵

Persecution of evangelical Christians sent thousands of refugees from France to Geneva for safety. Church historian William G. Naphy writes that the resources of the city hospital strained to the breaking point because of the constant influx of destitute travelers. The city began expelling foreigners in 1540 in an attempt to alleviate the overwhelming stress on the local economy and eleemosynary institutions. Records from 1539 show that the town of 12,000 citizens assisted 10,657 poor foreigners at the city hospital that year.¹⁶

Most foreigners who arrived in Geneva lived in cramped slums, but the economic competition of refugee artisans and nobles further contributed to tensions with native Genevans.¹⁷ By 1550, political parties were fighting among one another about limitations on enfranchisement for resident aliens as members of the bourgeois.¹⁸ The economic and political debates about citizenship and expulsion that swirled around Calvin's sermons on Micah would determine the fate of thousands of refugees in his city.

Reformation history scholar Elsie McKee's new book, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva*, offers exhaustive details and close readings of Calvin's sermons, particularly instances in which he addresses the congregation directly. She offers some well-informed inferences about the listeners in Calvin's congregation as he preached in the 1540s and 1550s. In an analysis of Calvin's sermons on 1 Corinthians from 1555, McKee writes:

Not only the learned but the illiterate were in the preacher's view. In expounding 1 Cor. 2:12 from the pulpit, Calvin says that when it comes to matters of the kingdom of God 'poor simple people who have never been to school' compare favorably with the highly educated who think they know everything. This acknowledgment of the uneducated is naturally lacking from the commentary, which is addressed to scholars, but it is evidence that the preacher is conscious that many of his hearers fall into the category of "simple people."¹⁹

McKee also names the "increasing numbers of refugees" who fled to Geneva during Calvin's years in ministry there.²⁰ Among the religious refugees, some were poor and uneducated, but others also were French nobles and artisans. The plain style in Geneva may have been an attempt to preach

¹⁵ William G. Naphy, *Calvin's Geneva*, in: Donald K. McKim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, New York (NY) 2004, 28–30.

¹⁶ Naphy (note 2), *Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation*, 122.

¹⁷ Ibid, 125.

¹⁸ Ibid, 137f.

¹⁹ Elsie McKee, *The Pastoral Ministry and Worship in Calvin's Geneva*, Geneva, Switzerland 2016, 524.

²⁰ Ibid., 523.

effectively to as many listeners as possible: noble and common, rich and poor, citizen and foreigner. This understanding of a diverse congregation will help us make sense of Calvin's rhetorical choices, especially when he addresses his listeners in the voice of the prophet Micah, and even in the voice of God.

3. A Brief Document History of the Micah 2:1 Sermon and Translation Notes

French and English immigrants in the city of Geneva formed *la compagnie des étrangers* in 1549 to preserve Calvin's sermons by shorthand transcription.²¹ T.H.L. Parker writes that only about six or seven of Calvin's sermons were copied down between 1541–1549 (i.e., the period before the *compagnie* hired a secretary to take down his sermons in shorthand).²² The sermons on Micah from late 1550 through 1551 are some of the earliest recorded sermons that reveal Calvin's scope of preaching on a whole book of the Bible by means of *lectio continua*. The French transcript of the appended translation comes from the *Supplementa Calviniana: Sermons sur le Livre de Michée*, and it was edited by Jean Daniel Benoît in 1964.²³

Calvin preached extemporaneously, and the sermons that we have were taken down and arranged later by experts from a document composed in shorthand writing.²⁴ The grammatical arrangement comes to us from his transcribers, editors, and publishers. I have taken some liberty to reduce some phrases into shorter sentences. Calvin's language is also full of colorful diction like “*or*,” “*eh*,” “*voilà*,” “*donc*,” etc. I have preserved some of these words to reflect Calvin's conversational style, and yet I have refrained from including every emphatic phrase to keep the translation from sagging under so many interjections.

4. Comment on Calvin's Sermon on Micah 2:1 (Monday, November 24, 1550)

Micah 2:1 (translated from the transcript): “A curse against those who think vain things, and did evil upon their beds. They did this in the light of morning because their hand is strong. They desired possessions and seized them, they took houses, they did violence to men in their homes, to their persons and their inheritance.”

Introduction: God demands obedience to the two commandments of the New Testament, which summarize the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament

Calvin begins his sermon on Micah 2:1 by explaining the continuity of God's expectations for the people of the Old and New Testaments. He names two categories of sin in Ancient Judah: disobedience to God with idolatry, and crimes against neighbors. What God asks of his people is

²¹ Thomas H. L. Parker, *Calvin's Preaching*, Louisville (KY) 1992, 65.

²² *Ibid*, 60.

²³ *Calvin* (note 1), 36–44.

²⁴ *Parker* (note 21), 66.

clear in the two tables of the ancient law and the commandments of Jesus Christ: “in the first place, that we render him honor that belongs to him, and then that we live in good equity and justice with our neighbors” (34a).²⁵ No one has any excuse, for the people of the Old Testament knew what God required of them because “... our Lord told in ten sentences all that concerns holiness and justice” (34a).

The same obligation to justice and equity that God demanded of Israel remains for the people who know the New Testament. The vocation of the Christian is to keep “that natural equity of which our Lord Jesus Christ speaks, when he says that we may only do to another that which we would want someone else to do to us” (34a). Neglect of God’s good teaching has led to two kinds of distortion among both peoples: superstition in worship that turns people away from God, and wicked government that turns people against one another. The covenant by which God binds the people to God’s self, as well as the sins that plague the people, are in some manner the same for the people of Judah, the hearers of the New Testament, and the inhabitants of Calvin’s Geneva. Calvin establishes from the beginning that Micah’s judgments are not only for ancient Judah: the continuity of the covenant through Christ makes the prophet’s words relevant as the Word of God in 1550.

“Evil upon their beds”: It is unnatural to reject sleep in order to plot evil

The first part of the sermon serves as an organizing preface to an exegetical exposition of each phrase in the three sentences from Micah 2:1. What follows is an abrupt shift to the text at hand: Calvin denounces scheming at night as unnatural and against God’s ordering of Creation. The wickedness of humankind must be very great, if we ignore something as simple and necessary as sleep in order to plot against one’s neighbors: “Ought we think as though we should harm our neighbor so much that we never sleep night or day? Should we think that at no point this is contrary to the commandments of God?” (34b). God has ordained sleep for all creatures, and yet we choose to behave more viciously than a ferocious beast.

Furthermore, sleep is not only something that gives us respite from our evil works; sleep restores us so that we might do good works, spare our neighbors the anger of exhaustion, and grant us rest from our labors:

In summary, when there is a question about us going to bed, if we want to have God present in our sleep, then we pray to him that he do us the grace of resting in good conscience, and that also the body relieve us from all work, and that it cleanse us of all bad affections, and of concerns that we give ourselves meaninglessly (35a).

²⁵ *Calvin*, Sermon on Micah 2:1, Scales Translation, 34a.

Rest is a gift from God that helps us live the kind of life that God expects of us. Calvin has examined the problem of devising evil at night from a few creative facets that explain why sleep matters: plotting at night is against the natural order of sleep at night, work in the day; sleep restores us to the ability to do good and maintain a good temper; and the rejection of sleep rejects the promises of the “spiritual rest” that God has in store for those who trust in him (35a).

“Their hand is strong”: The great possess greater capacity to do evil

Although Calvin in certain places during his sermon acknowledges that Micah’s words are for all the people of Judah, he argues in this section of the sermon that the prophet’s message is directed primarily toward the strong and powerful. All are capable of sinning against God and neighbor, and yet powerful persons are capable of so much more than the weak and downtrodden: “And, in fact, one sees this regularly, not that the great possess greater malice than others, but that they have their hands free, in contrast to the weak who do not have the means to do evil ...” (35a).

The prophetic judgments against the leaders of Judah become a stinging criticism of powerful citizens in Geneva. Calvin represents himself as the prophet; he expands the message of Scripture while pretending to be Micah in order to further explain and interpret the passage:

You who should do justice and equity to each one, who hold the scepter of justice in your hand, you are like brigands, and you do not cease in devising evil against those whom you should defend; the power which God has given you must be converted to an altogether different use, so that you would not suffer even one to be afflicted unjustly, that you would study to maintain the rights of the good. And instead of this, you only think of malice on your beds, and since you have the hands free, you set them to carry out that which you thought up previously (35b).

Although Calvin does not name particular persons or groups from Geneva in this sermon, he has turned the prophet’s words about justice toward his contemporary listeners by making the prophet’s words a direct address to his own congregation. Who might have been the poor and weak persons in contemporary Geneva? Who could fit the mold of “brigands” who abuse their authority to carry out injustices in the city? I suggest it is not improbable that Calvin had local notables in mind, perhaps even seated listeners who wished to expel religious refugees, town leaders who sought to limit enfranchisement.

“Robbing goods and inheritances”: greed as an insatiable lack of trust in God’s providence

The sermon continues with an extended exposition on the sin of greed. Calvin glosses Paul’s remarks in 2 Timothy when he says that “greed is the root of all evil” and “Saint Paul means that there’s no evil greater than that of greed. For after a person has devoted himself to this insatiable

covetousness, it stands that he falls to one vice after the other, such that there is never an end nor an amount that will bring him to the limit of his wickedness” (35b–36a). Calvin takes pains to affirm that our possessions are good blessings from God, and that “selling and buying is a part of life that belongs to human society” (36a). The problem, however, does not rest with the systems of commerce or the objects that are owned themselves. The capacity for sin resides in every human being who is not content with what God has given him or her, and thus seeks fulfillment in insatiable acquisitiveness of property and goods.

By contrast, Calvin offers a short monologue of how each person should be disposed toward God. He uses colloquial language as he says, “Ah well, God gave me this thing here, I shall live on it. If it is a little, I shall have to make do with it, and if he makes it multiply by his grace, then I shall be content with it. If it is a lot, then I must take care so as to be able to help my neighbors” (36b). The purpose of having these possessions is so that human beings can express gratitude for God’s providence, and so that one may serve one’s neighbors with one’s blessings. The purpose is not to pursue gain so that one does not need to rely upon God daily. Instead, he cites 1 Peter, albeit without quotation, that one ought to bring concerns to God and trust “that he grants us everything we need abundantly” (36b).

The sins that human beings commit towards others in this sermon are exclusively related to wealth and power. Calvin likens the sins of Ancient Judah to his own community: “We see today that there are not only the greedy, but also the usurious, and those who take on every side by illicit means and by wicked dealings, those who rejoice greatly in this world. What will happen if we live in simplicity and righteousness?” (37a).

Later in the sermon, Calvin quotes Isaiah 5 in which the prophet pronounces woe on those who join house to house, and speaks directly to his listeners with rhetorical questions: “Do you want to chase off your neighbors, as though this world here has been made only for you? And there is such covetousness in each one that, if they could, they would willingly shut the Sun up in their chests and closets” (38a). The selfishness that plagues the hearts of Genevan townsfolk not only destroys their own lives, but it also deprives their neighbors from enjoying good things.

Calvin confronts this selfishness against neighbors with a fascinating theological turn with his use of the word *prochain* as an adjective to connote “near,” and as a substantive noun that connotes “neighbor.” Whereas modern French distinguishes between the adjective *prochain* (near) and the noun *voisin* (neighbor), Calvin uses *prochain* for both meanings. God demands that human beings practice justice and equity toward *neighbors*, God vows to draw *near* in order to make it so, and Calvin uses the word *prochain* in both senses. Calvin’s sermon begins to blend these meanings, so that God not only draws *near* to humankind amid injustice, but Calvin suggests in this ambiguity

that God is also a *neighbor*. Calvin plays with the word in the following two excerpts as he warns the congregation that God sees and will address their greed:

It is the right time for us to learn to be humble under God's strong hand, so that he will not punish us in his wrath, so that he will not curse us. How will this be so? When we live in equity and justice with our *neighbors* [*prochains*, emphasis added], according to the point I have already touched upon (39b).

A few sentences later, Calvin begins to describe God as *prochain* to the listeners in his congregation, building on an ambiguity that God is both *near* and *neighbor* with the same word:

When we have inscribed this word on our hearts—even while everyone thinks that God is far away—we consider him as being present, and we know that he sees not only what we do, but what we think as well. In this matter we are not like the unfaithful; instead we conclude, “Here is the God who declares that he is *near* [*prochain*, emphasis added] us.”

Now if we consider him to be *near* [*prochain*], we will be able to trust in him truly, for he has said that he is near to those who call upon him in truth. . . . Since he has reprimanded us in this passage, God declares that he is *near* [*prochain*]. It is as if he were to say, “I must show myself as *near* [*prochain*] to human beings, because it seems to them that I am never able to reach them, nor to catch up with them” (39b).

I suggest that Calvin's use of the same word *prochain* offers a deep theological claim beyond the distinctions between adjectival and nominal parts of speech: God decides to become the neighbor to humankind. God becomes the neighbor in Jesus Christ, and the contemporary Genevan listeners discover God's presence in the faces of their neighbors. Obedience to the commandment to love one's neighbor with justice and equity is likewise a fulfillment of the commandment to love God above the idols of wealth and power.

Conclusion of the sermon on Micah 2:1: The Lord is near

The last movement of the sermon is a short treatment of Micah 2:3: God will bring judgment on the people of Judah for their wickedness. He shifts between the Old Testament and Geneva – placing himself in the mindset of someone in his contemporary context – imagining the thoughts of a person in the pew responding to the curses brought by the prophets Micah and Isaiah. Calvin builds a sustained argument in which God addresses the congregation directly with the phrase, “I, myself,” as God's promise to judge and rebuke those who do evil, both in the ancient world and his town of refugees, merchants, and old families.

The wealthy and powerful should not act as though no one sees their greed or mistreatment of others: God is just as near to that morning's congregation as God was to the people of Judah.

Near the end of the transcript, Calvin says, “And the prophet considers those who extort and do violence to others, who have no fear of anyone, who have it good in this world, to be the people whom God has declared his mortal enemies, especially those who have amassed goods by illicit means and wicked dealings. All such persons who have put one over their neighbors, they will be subjected to this sentence, this warning from the prophet” (40b). The prophet’s warning from thousands of years ago has become a living judgment in Calvin’s day.

The sermon concludes on an odd note, namely that Calvin does not call the wicked to repent, but rather exhorts the congregation to wait patiently for the judgment of the Lord. He does not seem to preach to a mixed audience of extortionists and the victims of their greed. The sermon appears to be addressed to a twofold audience in much of its content: those who extort and take advantage of the neighbor, and those who must endure until the day of God’s redemption (perhaps Calvin perceives both characteristics in conflict within individual persons). And yet, the final words of the sermon, which function as something between a concluding exhortation and a prayer to God, ask for God to “reform us,” so that “we would walk in justice and equity towards our neighbors ...” (41a).

5. Reflection on the Sermon on Micah 2:1

How does Calvin perceive the members of his congregation in light of the prophet Micah’s words? This sermon on Micah 2:1 was written and preached by a refugee (Calvin); to a congregation comprised, at least in part, of refugees (the worshipping congregation); and transcribed and published by refugees (*la compagnie des étrangers*). We noted earlier in this paper that there was an unprecedented redistribution of property in the late 1540s in Geneva due to the sale of ecclesial properties and the liquidation of estates from political families who fled.²⁶ *La compagnie des étrangers* that sponsored the transcription of his sermons was an association of religious refugees, some of whom must have been poor or disenfranchised in their new city.

Calvin focuses on matters of justice and equity between human beings, especially between neighbors. Is Calvin affirming the desires and opinions of his congregation by railing against the rich citizens who snap up property? How do Calvin’s words matter to listeners who have left everything – their homes, their families, their occupations – to settle in a new country as poor resident aliens? With whom does Calvin sympathize when he says, “Today each person shuts his eyes when it comes to a question of acting with equity and justice toward one’s neighbors, and on the contrary one says, ‘It does not matter, it means little to me what comes, as long as I get mine’” (39a)?

²⁶ *Naphy* (note 2), 133.
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Calvin has appropriated two insights from his homiletical role model, John Chrysostom, for his preaching style as a pastor to all members of Genevan society. Exegesis and explication of the text demand preeminent attention, but the pastor must do this in service to addressing concerns of the worshiping congregation. In this sermon on Micah 2:1, Calvin appears to preach on behalf of the poor and destitute in Geneva, while he spares no one who seeks to profit from the great economic shifts in the city at the expense of the neighbor's impoverishment. Calvin preaches with conviction that the words of the Old and New Testaments together will instruct believers in how they may follow the two commandments to love God above all idols, and to love one's neighbor with justice and equity.

6. Considerations for Preaching Today

The 1550 sermons on Micah reveal the distinctive style of Calvin's project to reform preaching. Micah's ancient judgments and warnings speak through Calvin's sermon to address contemporary crises of injustice and inequality in Geneva. The proper response to prophetic words of judgment is obedience to God's two commandments: to live generously toward one another, and to live thankfully toward God. The sermon demands that individual listeners change their behavior in order to make life in the city possible for some of its most vulnerable inhabitants: refrain from selfishness, stop devising acquisitive schemes, repent of greed, accept simplicity for oneself so that others might have enough. These demands remain valid and true preparation for life with God throughout the covenant promises of the Old Testament, the New Testament, sixteenth-century Geneva, and today.

With this appreciation for the continuity of God's covenant grace and demand for justice, we can exegete Calvin's preaching context, and imagine how it might offer insights to preachers and homileticians today. Calvin was a refugee, and he was preaching to a mixed congregation comprised significantly of fellow refugees. Many of his listeners were dispossessed, struggling to survive in a city that, despite its xenophobia, remained one of the few places of welcome for evangelical Christians in the early sixteenth century.

We also have no shortage of stories about our collective cruelty toward immigrants and strangers: many have been arrested and indefinitely detained with no criminal record other than entering the country as undocumented immigrants. This year, *The New Yorker* published an investigative report by Sarah Stillman titled, "The Mothers Being Deported by Trump." This project tells the stories of women, mostly from Central and South America, who have children and no criminal record, but nonetheless have been in and out of prison or detention centers since President Trump took office. Stillman describes the harrowing story of Alejandra Ruiz, a mother

who has lived in the United States since she was two years old, but now faces deportation and separation from her children:

In detention, Ruiz barely ate – the food, mainly bread and beans, looked bad and smelled worse. Officers gave her fibre packets and pills, but she refused to take them. She spent time in the center’s law library, researching her rights. Talking to her kids on the phone was excruciating. When they spoke at all, it was mostly sobs. Her twelve-year-old daughter was especially distraught.²⁷

What would the prophet Micah, or the pastor Calvin, or even God say to listeners in the United States about the commandment to love these mothers with justice and equity? Something powerful comes through Calvin’s framing of Micah’s words under Christ’s two great commandments: God becomes *prochain*, the neighbor, and the decision to love the neighbor is a recognition that one cannot love God without treating others with justice and equity.

In twenty-first century America, ordinary people continue to flee their home countries because of war, persecution, or need. When we call ourselves Christians, we must also hear Micah’s words of judgment as a condemnation of our selfishness, as well as a call to repentance in the hope that God will reform us. Preaching a “plain sense” of prophetic justice and equity demands that we, also, as preachers and congregations, should ask ourselves how we may commit to actions that demonstrate love of God and our neighbors. Calvin was asking questions that we should ask at a time like this, forceful questions that demand that we examine ourselves carefully: “Do you want to chase off your neighbors, as though this world here has been made only for you?” (38a). If the answer is no, then preaching a “plain sense” of God’s prophetic word for today may do much good.

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²⁷ Sarah Stillman, The Mothers Being Deported by Trump, in: The New Yorker (July 22, 2017) <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-mothers-being-deported-by-trump> (Accessed August 9, 2018).