

JUDGMENT ON INJUSTICE
Amos 3:9-4:3; 5:10-15; 6:4-7; 8:4-6

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John and Roberta were touring their brand new house. It was a house that Roberta had paid for with her money, a fact of which she constantly reminded John. In each room of the house she said to her husband: “John, if it were not for my money, we would not be here.” John didn’t say a word.

That afternoon a truck delivered a load of new furniture...furniture which Roberta paid for with her money. After the furniture was in its place, they toured the house again. As they observed each room, beautifully appointed and magnificently decorated, Roberta reminded her husband: “John, if it were not for my money, this furniture would not be here.” Again, John was silent.

Late in the afternoon another truck came with a special piece of furniture which was to be the focal point of the family room. It was a combination stereo-television-computer center all wrapped into one gorgeous piece of furniture. Roberta paid for it with her money. When it was in place, Roberta again said: “John, if it were not for my money, this state-of-the-art AV system would not be here.”

Finally, John spoke: “Honey, I don’t want to make you feel bad, but if it were not for your money, I wouldn’t be here either!” (*Preaching, March/April 2000*)

We continue our sermon series this morning from the book of Amos. We come to sermon number two – judgment on injustice. We are going to look at various passages throughout the book that show how the wealthy and the well-to-do in ancient Israel were abusing the poor, the needy, the common worker.

This is not an easy sermon for me to preach because it’s going to step on my toes, and it’s going to step on your toes – if you’ll be honest. I want you to know what I’m not doing. I’m not playing partisan politics. I’m not trying to tell you how to vote. I’m not saying what role, if any, the government should have in any of this problem. I’m just telling you how the people of God ought to act in accordance with the word of the prophet Amos.

I. A great disparity existed between the level of living of the rich and the level of living of the poor.

Look at Amos 4:1
Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria,
Who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,

Who say to your husbands, “Bring now, that we may drink!”

Now, there are some preachers who have courage and there are some preachers who are cowards. Amos was a preacher who had courage. He looks to the affluent women of Samaria, the capital city of ancient Israel. Remember, he is prophesying around 760 B.C., during the time of Jeroboam II, during the height of the prosperity of the Northern Kingdom. Folks have assumed that their prosperity is the result of the direct blessing of God.

The women were living in opulence. This was the indulgent, wealthy upper class. Bashan was a fertile plain in the mountain range of both sides of the middle and upper Yarmuk River. The region was noted for the lushness of pastures and, thus, the fattest of cattle. He called these women the “fat cows of Bashan” who were gaining their weight by gouging the poor.

Notice, they oppressed the poor. They crushed the needy. And they command their husbands, “Bring me more.” They need more and more to satisfy their materialistic thirst. The husbands more and more exploited the poor to keep their well-to-do wives happy and content. The word “bring” is an imperative, a command. “Bring me more.” These women were dominating their families. They were callous in heart.

There was a great disparity in Amos’s day in ancient Israel, in the Northern Kingdom, between the haves and the have-nots.

Turn to Amos 6:4-6.

Those who recline on beds of ivory
And sprawl on their couches,
And eat lambs from the flock
And calves from the midst of the stall,
Who improvise to the sound of the harp,
And like David have composed songs for themselves,
Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls
While they anoint themselves with the finest of oil,
Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.

Those wealthy citizens slept in the best beds. The poor could not afford a bed. They slept on a mat, at best – much less a bed inlaid with ivory. The word here for “sprawl” has the connotation of drunkenness or laziness, hanging over the couches.

They ate the best food. Ordinary citizens in that day perhaps got meat two or three times a year at the annual festivals. But these folks were getting the fattened calves, actually from the midst of the fattening pen.

They lounged around, eating and drinking and making up songs – imagining themselves to be little Davids, little kings. “You strum away,” Amos says, “on your harps.” And they enjoy themselves not only with entertainment, but also with drinking (verse 6).

They had the finest lotions, the best grade of oils they used to anoint. Whether it was medicinal or cosmetic or cultic – whatever the anointing, they had the very best.

Israel – Joseph – was about to break up as a nation, yet the leading citizens were not sick over it as they should have been. They were so self-centered, totally preoccupied with the pleasures of life, that they were blinded to the threatening reality all around them. Life, so they thought, could not be better. But according to Amos, it could not have been worse.

Yes, in ancient Israel, in the eighth century B.C., they had a great disparity between the haves and the have-nots.

Do we have disparity in Dallas?

Mark Cuban, the owner of the Dallas Mavericks, is a “have” – an iconoclastic dotcom billionaire. Cuban built a house of ivory. It’s a 24,000 square foot Dallas mansion. Cuban says, “Let’s suppose I’m worth \$1.1 billion and, through a series of incredibly moronic moves, I lose \$100 million.” Cuban says, “Oh gee! What does that leave me?” (*Sports Illustrated*, 11/6/2000, p. 88)

Seems like a sense of arrogance. “Losing \$100 million is no big deal to me,” says Cuban, “because I’m still left with \$1 billion in the bank.”

Yes, there is a disparity – not only in ancient Israel between the haves and the have-nots, but there is also a disparity in our own culture between the haves and the have-nots.

According to *Forbes* Magazine, CEO pay has now skyrocketed to 361 times that of the average worker. If you don’t think income disparity is growing, compare that to the 1950s, when a typical CEO made 20 times the salary of his or her average worker. But in 2017, CEO pay at an S&P 500 Index company soared to an average of 361 times more than the average rank-and-file worker. The average CEO pay in 2017 among these firms was right at \$14 million per year. There were actually some companies at which CEOs made nearly 1000 times the pay of the average employee.

Folks, I know a free economy is the greatest economic system on earth. I fully believe that. But we’ve got a problem when the general is making 361 times more than the soldiers. Something has gone terribly, terribly wrong in our value system. Somewhere along the line, these companies have elected boards of directors who have lost the ability to make common-sense judgments. And there seems to be no end in sight.

Speaking of losing common-sense judgment, what about coaches’ escalating pay?

Now, I’m going to use this school as an example simply because they have been in the news a lot lately, and the university trustees recently approved the largest collegiate athletic coach contract ever written in the history of humanity. I think that makes them fair game for a little scrutiny. Of course, I’m talking about Clemson University, which is about a 20 minute drive from where I grew up in Greenville, South Carolina.

Now before the Clemson crowd gets angry at me, let me say, first of all, I'm a Clemson fan. I have a brother who went to Clemson University, a sister who went to the University of South Carolina, and I pull for both universities of my home state. Second, my niece, Logan Young, has just been elected student body president at Clemson University. I'm not taking a cheap shot at somebody else – I'm talking about my own back yard and my own family.

Dabo Swinney recently received a 10-year, \$92 million contract (April, 2019). The biggest contract in college football history.

Where does it stop? There is obviously no end in sight – for the goal of athletics is to win at all costs. Whatever building you have to build, build it. Whatever salary you have to pay, pay it. Because apparently the number one priority for most American universities is to win at sports.

Aren't these educational institutions? We have clearly lost our way. And tuition continues to climb to cover the cost.

Of course, this disparity of well-being is not limited to capitalistic economies. In fact, in Socialist systems, or Communist systems, the average member of the populous fares much worse.

II. Ancient Israelites made their money at the expense of the poor.

Look at Amos 5:11.

Therefore because you impose heavy rent on the poor
And exact a tribute of grain from them,
Though you have built houses of well-hewn stone,
Yet you will not live in them;
You have pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine.

Look at the end of verse 12.

You turn aside the poor in the gate.

Turn to Amos 8:4-6

Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying,
“When will the new moon be over,
So that we may sell grain,
And the sabbath, that we may open the wheat market....”

They can't even rest for the Holy Day because they are thinking and spinning in their minds the making and cutting of deals.

(Fred Craddock illustration about a deal cut in church - on back of a bulletin)

At the end of verse 5, they are cheating with dishonest scales. In verse 6, they buy the helpless for money and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Indeed, they were inflicting harsh and unjust treatment on the unprotected members of society. They were skipping the measure. They were boosting the price. They were using dishonest scales.

You might ask the question, “Pastor, what does that have to do with me? What does that have to do with America? We have not made ourselves wealthy at the expense of the poor?”

I’m asking you a hard question today. I’m asking myself a hard question today. We don’t want ourselves surprised on the day of judgment, like the well-to-do of Samaria.

III. A false sense of security existed among the rich in ancient Israel.

Look at Amos 3:9ff. Here in chapter 3 is the proclamation there is going to be a trial. “Therefore (verse 11), thus says the Lord God, ‘An enemy, even one surrounding the land, will pull down your strength from you and your citadels will be looted.’”

Those who have been looting now will be looted. “You’re going to be like a lamb in the lion’s mouth (verse 12), nothing but pits and pieces left. Maybe a leg or a piece of an ear, but you will be consumed.”

Look at verse 15.

“I will also smite the winter house together with the summer house;
The houses of ivory will also perish
And the great houses will come to an end.”
Declares the Lord.

There is a false sense of security among these people.

Look at Amos 4:2-3 to see what is going to happen to these opulent women.

The Lord God has sworn by His holiness,
“Behold, the days are coming upon you
When they will take you away with meat hooks,
And the last of you with fish hooks.”

In verse 3, he is saying that there are going to be big holes in your security wall. They are going to haul you out.

It’s not a pretty picture. These women, who stood with so much opulence, are going to find themselves corpses being dragged out on meat hooks. God is so sure what He is going to do, notice in verse 2 He swears by His own holiness.

I’ve always loved this verse, because you swear by something what? Greater than yourself. God looks around, there is no one greater than He is, so He swears by His own holiness.

The treatment of the women is going to be worse than how they have self-indulgently treated the poor.

Mark Cuban, the Dallas Mavericks owner, said in the *Sports Illustrated* interview, “If you have money, you don’t need to ask for permission for anything.” His money gives him freedom, he says. Freedom to buy Pumas if he wants, to sit by the pool and read a book, to own a professional basketball team. “If you have money, you don’t need to ask for permission for anything. (*Sports Illustrated*, 11/6/2000, p. 89)

I’ve got news for you. When you think you’ve arrived, when you think it’s your own wit and wisdom that have gotten you where you are, you will soon realize that the smartest aren’t always the wealthiest, the wealthiest aren’t always the wittiest, and the self-assurance and security those folks enjoy can vanish in the blink of an eye.

IV. Fourth, I want to say to you that God’s people are poor people.

That’s a bold statement, I realize. But I’m going to ask you to read through the Minor Prophets. If there is any message there, it’s that God has a special relationship and covenant with the poor, the downtrodden, the abused, the widow, the orphan. Maybe it’s a carpenter or a young maiden named Mary that God might would choose to be the father and mother of the Son of God.

Like Jesus said, it’s very hard for those of us who have a lot of things to ever make it into the kingdom of God. Those are the words of the Lord. Hear them, if you will. He said a camel can go through the eye of a needle more quickly than a rich man can make it into the kingdom of God. He says when the nations are judged, they will be judged on how they treated the one without clothes, the one without food – “those who are the least of these, my brethren.”

Luke 6:20 says,
Blessed are you who are poor, for yours in the Kingdom of God.

What difference does that make? Some of you own companies. Who gets the bonuses? Just the top? Or when the team wins does it go all the way down to every employee who is a member of the team? Who do you think about when things go well? Just the guy steering the boat, or all those who are breaking their backs rowing below in the hot belly of the ship?

What Amos is trying to say to the rich elite is people matter. All people matter. If you learn in your life to speak to the person mopping the floor, just like you speak to the president of the company, to give them the same respect and show no partiality, then you, maybe, for the first time in your life have begun to think like God thinks.

I’ve made that a goal in my life. And I’m working on it. And I’m doing better than I’ve ever done before. I’m trying to learn the name of the person who waits on me at the table – to call him or her by name. I’m trying to learn the name of the person who checks me out at the grocery store. They are real people with real jobs. And for the most part, they are carrying the rest of us on their backs.

One lady remembers that during her second month at nursing school, the professor gave a pop quiz. This lady said she was a conscientious student and breezed through the questions until she came to the last one: “What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?”

Surely this had to be a joke, she thought. “I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50s, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. ‘Absolutely,’ said the professor. ‘In your careers you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say hello.’ I’ve never forgotten that lesson,” writes the nurse. “And I learned her name was Dorothy.”

Don’t forget Dorothy, Amos said to the Samaritans.

V. There is a difference between talking the talk and walking the walk.

I got a kick out of a confession by pastor Mark Batterson of National Community Church. He said that when he was just a kid, he would take capital campaign offering envelopes from the pew rack at his church and fill them out with extraordinarily generous numbers. He’d put down that he was pledging \$1 million to the capital campaign fund, but instead of putting his name as the donor, he made up names for pseudo-philanthropists. Quite a devious mind as a child. The church noticed, despite the various names of the big givers who never gave, the handwriting always looked like little Mark Batterson’s handwriting on the pledge cards. (*Opportunity Costs*)

You see, it’s always easier to make a financial commitment for someone else rather than make that commitment yourself.

I got a chuckle out of the recent reporting of the 2020 presidential candidates and their contributions to charity. The reality is those running for president gave well below the U.S. average to charity, as reflected in their 2018 income tax deductions. One candidate in particular, who is running on the platform of giving everything to everybody, only contributed .31 percent of his personal income to charity. And, quite frankly, his competitors in the presidential race didn’t fare much better across the board. (Joe Light, Laura Davison, and Bloomberg, *fortune.com*, 4/26/2019)

Candidates with huge incomes and a lot of talk about taking care of the poor – who are actually doing nothing themselves with their own paychecks.

Yes, Amos is not asking the Israelites what they are doing with somebody else’s income; he is asking them what they are doing with their own. Are they looking after the least of these? Are they bringing the whole tithe into the house of worship to empower the people of God to do much good?

I’m not criticizing capitalism, nor am I suggesting a particular candidate. What I am saying is this: The problem resides within ourselves, not a system. The solution is the open hands and hearts of the people of God.