

Pursuing Biblical Justice

Purpose

To identify how authentic worship develops a mature faith that is expressed in a social conscience



Listen

The Scripture for this lesson is printed below. The background text is Amos 5:10-15, 21-24; 8:4-12; 2 Kings 13:23-25. Amos 5:10-15, 21-24

10 They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.

11 Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine.

12 For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins— you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

13 Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time.

14 Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said.

15 Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph....

21 I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

24 But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Key Verse: Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)

Look

When Ed Koch was mayor of New York City, he was asked one day about the homeless people on the streets. His honor replied, "If only every church took care of ten homeless men, the city would have no further problems with these persons." About the same time, then president Ronald Reagan said, "If only every church took care of ten welfare families, there would be no poverty problem."

Paul Moore, Jr., Episcopal bishop of New York, labeled the two statements "naïve" because they overlooked the complexity of homelessness and poverty. The bishop noted that even professionally trained full-time social workers have been unable to do more than put a dent in these problems, which have their roots in economic forces; unemployment; poor education; lack of opportunity; mental illness; alcohol and drug abuse; haphazard upbringing; and a host of other thorny causes, sometimes going back for generations.

Moore agreed that churches have a responsibility to do works of charity. But he pointed out that in that year, 1982, a family needed \$10,000 to survive. If each church took ten families, that would cost \$100,000, which was more than most churches' budgets. Very few churches could do that year after year. Moore concluded that both statements confused charity with justice.¹

The bishop might have been taking his cue from Amos. The prophetic model is not for religion to foot the bill for solving every social problem, but to cry out for justice and insist that government, commerce, and industry address these matters too.

Live

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century bc, during the time when the people of Israel were divided into two kingdoms. The kingdom in the northern part of Palestine retained the name Israel, while the kingdom in the south took the name Judah. The split had occurred about 150 years before Amos prophesied. From the time of the division, the Judahites had Jerusalem within their borders and thus continued to worship God at the temple King Solomon had built. The Israelite monarch at the time of the separation, however, feared that pilgrimages by his subjects to Jerusalem would lead them to want to reunite the two kingdoms. To head off that possibility, he set up two worship centers in his realm. One was in the city of Dan, in the northern part of the kingdom. The other in the city of Bethel, near Israel's border with Judah, was a mere 12 miles from Jerusalem.

In establishing Dan and Bethel as rival worship sites, the northern king also introduced elements of idolatry into the worship of Yahweh. The king had a golden calf made for each site and told his people, "Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt" (1 Kings 12:28). Probably his intention was to provide symbols in lieu of the ark of the covenant, which remained in the Jerusalem temple. Most likely the calves were thought of as pedestals on which Yahweh sat. Nonetheless, in reporting the installation of the golden calves, the author of First Kings observed, "And this thing became a sin" (12:30).

As unholy as the worship observances had become, the socioeconomic practices were no better. The wealthy lent money to the working class. When debtors

could not repay these loans, the lenders sold them into slavery. Lavish buildings were constructed while the ignored poor and sick sat at the gates begging. Dishonest merchants regularly used fixed scales (Amos 2:11, but read also 2:6-8.).

Worse, those who were hurt by these unholy goings-on had no legal recourse. Amos 5:10 refers to the “gate” of the city, which was where community elders served as arbiters of disputes and as official witnesses for legal transactions. Regrettably, these elders would, for a bribe, “afflict the righteous” and “push aside the needy” (5:12). Further, these elders hated “the one who reproves in the gate” (5:10). A reprover was anyone who advocated for a poor plaintiff.

Still worse, those who financially benefited from the ongoing injustice, dishonesty, and fraud were convinced that their inhumanity did not matter as long as they maintained pious customs. Their very prosperity, the prosperous believed, was a sign of God’s approval.

When have you assumed that success in a venture was a clear sign of divine approval? Like an Angry Lion

With Israel’s ethics and judicial matters in such sorry shape, God needed someone to tell the people about God’s approaching judgment and call them to repentance. There were plenty of priests in Bethel, but idolatry had polluted the worship of God. Those religious leaders were no longer willing to speak the word of Yahweh.

In the southern kingdom of Judah, however, in the village of Tekoa, was a herdsman named Amos. He was a devout man, a shepherd, and a fruit farmer (7:14-15). He had no ambitions to be a prophet, yet God called him to prophesy. Amos compared the experience with hearing the voice of God roar like an angry lion:

The Lord roars from Zion,
and utters his voice from Jerusalem....
The lion has roared;
who will not fear?
The Lord God has spoken
who can but prophesy? (1:2; 3:8)

Following God’s instruction, Amos left his flocks and herds and traveled from Tekoa in Judah to Bethel in Israel; and there Amos uttered his prophecy. From what we can surmise from the Book of Amos, his entire ministry may have lasted only a week or two in about the year 760 bc. Yet it was not the length of his work that mattered, but the fact that he faithfully did what God asked of him.

While the Bible does not state where the prophet declared his message, it may have been in the vicinity of the shrine containing the calf. Amos 7:12 reports that Amaziah, the priest (probably chief priest) of Bethel, confronted Amos, telling him to return to his own country and prophesy there; but Amos would not be silenced.

Amos first named the sins of Israel’s neighboring nations, including Judah. This likely pleased the listening crowd. When Amos started talking about the sins of Israel, however, their feelings turned to

anger at Amos and anxiety about their fate. Amos warned that unless the people and especially the leaders promptly repented, they would suffer God's wrath just as surely as their unholy neighbors. God had held a plumb line in the midst of Israel and found the nation far "out of plumb" morally, ethically, and spiritually (7:7-9).

The plumb line was a pictorial way of describing how far Israel was from righteousness; but in 5:12, Amos stated the case against Israel baldly, without metaphor: "For I [God] know how many are your transgressions,/and how great are your sins."

In what personal situation has God's word been to you like the roar of a lion? Why?

Practicing Two-Legged Christianity

One aspect of Amos' prophecy that we find difficult is the fact that while his indictment was aimed largely at the privileged and priestly classes—those who "trample[d] on the poor" (5:11) and those who offered "burnt offerings and grain offerings" (5:22)—the impending doom Amos announced was to fall without discrimination on the kingdom as a whole. (In 722/21 bc, the Assyrians conquered Israel and dispersed its citizens throughout other lands.) Thus, part of the guilt of the prosperous was that they had the power to involve even the innocent in their downfall.

How sad that even the religious leaders who should have been crying out for justice for the downtrodden were instead part of the apparatus that supported injustice! As a result, God pronounced their religious activities as worse than useless; they were offensive to God. "I hate, I despise your festivals," God said through Amos (5:21).

Even though you offer me your burnt offerings
and grain offerings,
I will not accept them....
Take away from me the noise of your songs. (Amos 5:22-23)

God was not indicting their acts of worship, nor did he want social action to replace worship. God was furious that those acts were being used as cover to pronounce as righteous behaviors that were not. The problem was not with the worship, but with the worshipers.

Amos told his audience what was needed to make worship worthy: "Let justice roll down like waters,/and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24). Note the pairing of "justice" in the first clause with "righteousness" in the second. The two words are not referring to different things. In Hebrew poetry—and much of Amos, including 5:24, is poetry—the second clause in a verse often parallels the first. It is, in other words, a different way of making the same point, but worded dissimilarly for emphasis.

Today, "justice" often means people getting the punishment they deserve for some wrongdoing. The Old Testament word for justice does not have that meaning. The Hebrew word translated as "justice" actually means "righteousness." So when Amos spoke of justice, he had something more grace filled in mind. Biblical justice includes mercy and reflects God's dealings with people according to his love and faithfulness. Biblical justice often includes what we mean when we pair the word justice with words such as economic, political, racial, and social. Biblical justice is a call for a society in which all people can live in dignity, liberty, and freedom from want. That is why there can be no righteousness (no right

worship) without justice. Amos addressed his message to the well-off and the highly placed; but even if we are in neither of those categories, we should not dismiss his message. Biblical justice calls us to share our blessings—money, education, privilege, or political freedom—with others who have been denied those blessings.

Amos' message is about us hearing the voice of the lion and helping our world to hear it as well. As one example, consider that at the time of this writing, the United Methodist conferences in Ohio are planning to confront the Ohio legislature over the methods used to fund public education—a system that leaves many students in grossly inadequate schools while others receive a well-financed education. The state supreme court has declared the funding system unconstitutional, but the legislature is ignoring the court. So United Methodists in Ohio are looking for responsible ways to let the lion's roar be heard. As Bishop John Hopkins put it, "The church needs to be involved in politics. We need to be civil without being soft, engaged without being used, and political without being partisan."

Christianity is sometimes described as having two legs. One leg represents spiritual surrender to God and holy living. The other leg represents faith expressed in concrete action. Any faith that emphasizes only one of these legs walks about as well as a one-legged person. It is not enough to be dutiful in worship; we need also to seek justice and right treatment for the deprived from those in authority.

When and only when we are engaged in biblical justice do our acts of worship arise as a sweet sound that is pleasing to God's ears.

How do you keep both "legs" of Christianity healthy?

O God of justice, help us to include daily acts of justice in worshipful living, so that the sound of our worship brings you joy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

1 From "Charity must not replace justice," by Paul Moore, Jr., in The Plain Dealer, February 3, 1982.