

Justice for All?
Amos 5

“No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” That’s what Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, quoting from Amos chapter 5 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963. And in what may turn out to be the last sermon to have a dramatic impact on American culture, he called Americans to a more consistent commitment to our founding principles, to pursue justice and righteousness for everyone by treating everyone equally under our constitution and the laws of our land.

Almost sixty years later, many of us congratulate ourselves on following his lead, creating as we have a much more just society than the one to which he first issued his challenge. After all, because of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, no American younger than me remembers any meaningful legal restrictions based on race. Yes, in our America, Clarence Thomas from Georgia can become a Supreme Court Justice and Tim Scott from South Carolina can become a United States Senator.

And Mississippi in particular has made tremendous strides. Between 1882 and 1968, more black people were lynched in Mississippi than in any other state, in spite of our relatively small population. And it was sixty years ago this month that Medgar Evers was gunned down in his driveway in Jackson. But today, Black Mississippians make up 37% of the state’s voting population, and they serve in all levels of government. In spite of our differences, we have learned how to work together in many ways, and our common culture – expressed in our music and our food, our faith and our literature – continues to fascinate people from around the world. And of course, we Mississippians can be justifiably proud that it was our state that brought the lawsuit to the Supreme Court that, a year ago this week, finally overturned the grave injustice that was the Roe v. Wade decision, a decision that allowed some 60 million American babies, 20 million of them with Black mothers and fathers, to be killed.

Yes, aren’t we glad we’re not like those unjust, unrighteous folks Amos was talking to? After all, in America, everyone has the right to bring a lawsuit in court, and everyone has the right to be represented by an attorney when accused of a crime. In fact, it’s not too much of a stretch to say that our legal system was founded on Biblical principles, like those found in Leviticus 19: “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly” (19:15). But Amos said that his readers “distress the righteous and accept bribes, and turn aside the poor in the gate.” And since ancient Israelite judges sat in the city gates to dispense justice, Amos was condemning them for denying the poor equal access to the courts. For shame!

But that wasn’t all. Amos also accused his readers of oppressing the poor by charging them high rents and taxes. In chapter 8, Amos went further, condemning his readers for selling second-rate grain at high prices. He even says that they cheated their customers, charging more than they should and delivering less than they promised (8:5-6). In short, they were primarily motivated by greed, not godliness. For shame!

In contrast, God told His people, again in Leviticus 19, that they should leave some of their crops in their fields and vineyards, so that those who were needy could gather something for themselves (19:9-10). God told His people to pay their workers promptly (19:13) – in case they were living from paycheck to paycheck, as all too many modern Americans do. Most importantly, God made it clear that

His people were to have just weights and measures, thus making sure that everyone received the full amount they bought or the full payment for what they sold (19:36). Thus, God called His people to live by generosity, not greed. They were to provide opportunities to the poor as the best way to help them improve their condition. Instead of trying to cheat one another they were to express their mutual love by being honest, forthright and fair.

Okay, so, how are we modern Americans doing on all that? And no, I'm not mainly talking about changes that need to be made in our laws or our public policy, even though there is obvious room for improvement on that front. For is it just that one child has access to much greater educational resources than another who lives just a few miles away in another county? Is it just for fathers to beget children and then suffer no legal consequences for refusing to take responsibility for those children's financial or emotional needs? There are surely some ways that our elected officials can continue to make the playing field more level for all Americans.

But when you get right down to it, in this chapter Amos is not talking to the ancient kings, those who were in charge of public policy. And he wasn't talking to the priests, those who were responsible for leading the worship of God. No, Amos was condemning the people of Israel in general. And so, even if we Americans have in fact corrected so many of those laws that once prevented the disadvantaged from getting a fair shake, what are we as individuals doing in our everyday lives actively to promote justice and righteousness? How are each of us doing at helping those who are in need?

For example, there are jobs you can do for yourself and save a little money – you can cut your own grass or scrub your own toilets, rather than giving that job to someone else. It might be cheaper to shop at a big box store rather than to support a struggling small business. And we can all find ways to spend our money on ourselves and our families rather than looking for worthwhile causes to support. You know, according to Barna research, only 21% of Christians give a full tithe of their income to their church.

But what if our lives really were marked more by generosity than by greed? What if we actively sought out ways to use what we have to make a difference in our community, to give others a hand up? What if we really saw ourselves as nothing more than stewards of the time, talent and treasure that God has entrusted to each of us, and if we were to channel more of those blessings to others? How different might our communities look? How much more compelling would our witness be?

For when we look at Amos chapter 5, we see that the way we treat other people is intertwined with the relationship we have with God. Notice that at the end of the chapter he accuses his readers for their tradition of worshipping all sorts of false gods. Even as far back as the time God was leading them out of slavery in Egypt, Amos says they had been two-timing the Lord, offering sacrifices to Him while carrying their images of their false gods with them. For shame!

And when the northern kingdom of Israel split off from the southern kingdom of Judah, the Israelites began to worship the Lord in different ways. Instead of going to the Temple in Jerusalem, verse 5 reminds us that they worshipped God in other places. So, it's no wonder that God rejected their festivals and their assemblies, their offerings of grain or animals. He wouldn't listen to their words of praise because they were singing strange songs – and with voices that were lifted toward other gods at the same time. For shame!

But why was it so important to God that His people worship Him exclusively? Because He had made them in His image in order that they might be a right relationship with Him. Because He had

brought them out of Egypt to be His very own people, His special treasure, a kingdom of priests to worship Him.

And don't we have even greater reasons to worship God alone? For we have been freed, not from physical slavery but from bondage to sin and death. We have not only been made the people of God, but have been joined to the very body of Christ. So for any of us to give the credit for the Lord's gifts and blessings to any other god, for any of us to give our love and devotion to any other god would be as perverse as a husband insisting that he loved his wife at the same time that he was sleeping around with other women.

And why was it so important that God's Old Testament people worship Him in exactly the right way in only one place? Because only in that place, the Temple of the Lord, and only through all the ceremonies and rituals associated with it, could the people see an illustration of the Person and Work of Christ. It was the only place and the only way that Old Testament believers could get a glimpse of the sacrificial death of Christ and the blessings that Christ thus bestows on all who trust in Him. And so, for them to try to worship the One True God in other ways and in other places would be like us saying that the cross of Christ is not necessary for salvation. It would be like us saying there are more ways to the Father than through Christ.

Now, I know we Evangelical Presbyterian types say we believe all the right things about Jesus' Person and Work: it's all right there in our Confession of Faith and Catechisms, for cryin' out loud! But is our practice as good as our profession? Or do we find ourselves slipping from our faith in Christ alone by seeking assurance through our service or our giving? Do we take pride in the fact that we were baptized, or that we made a public profession of faith sometime in the past, or that we show up for church every week? Do we soft-pedal the exclusive claims of Christ in order not to offend those of other faiths? In spite of what we say we believe about God's power and love, do we give ourselves over to worry or anxiety, or even despair or depression? In short, are we really trusting in God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?

Worse yet, do we ever catch ourselves looking to other things or activities or relationships to provide meaning and purpose in our lives? Do we trust in our bank accounts or our retirement plans or our jobs to meet our economic needs? Do we look to our families or friends to build up our confidence? Are we really interested in drawing closer to God in prayer, or do we prefer to be distracted by our many and varied entertainments? When we have important decisions to make, do we look to God's Word, or do we rely on our reason or our feelings, our tradition or our experience? Are we really as exclusively faithful to God as we say we are?

You know, God blessed His Old Testament people richly. As Amos 5:11 says, they had well-constructed stone houses to live in. They had vineyards that produced grapes for them. But because they did not pursue justice and righteousness, because they neglected God and abused their less fortunate neighbors, God said they would not go on living in those houses. They would not get to drink the wine they made. And the northern kingdom of Israel was indeed carried off into exile by the Assyrians, just as the last verse of chapter 5 says.

And haven't we American Christians been just as greatly blessed? Hasn't God given us everything we need and so much of what we want? Hasn't He given us His own Son to die for us, and to rise from the dead so that we might have eternal life with Him forever and the power of resurrection life

even today? Hasn't He promised to return, to take us to Himself on the Day that He sets all things right and makes all things new?

So while we wait for Him, shouldn't we live for His glory? Shouldn't we trust Him enough to keep His commandments, loving Him with all we are and all we have, and loving our neighbors just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves? Shouldn't we try to make sure that His justice is available to everyone, and that we display His righteousness in everything we say and do? For how else can we really show Him that we love Him? How else can we seek the Lord that we might live?