

Minor Prophets' Major Gripes, III

Amos on the Impoverished

June 8, 2003

AMOS AIN'T SO FAMOUS

- Hosea married Gomer, and preached: Don't Add to God.
- Joel used Locust to underscore his message: Don't Take God for Granted.

Amos is a possible contemporary (circa 750 BC). But unlike Hosea and Joel, Amos lacked the credentials of an accepted prophet.

... I'm not one of your professional prophets. I certainly never trained to be one. I'm just a shepherd, and I take care of fig trees. But the Lord called me ... - Amos 7:14-15 NLT

This Amos wasn't so famous ... and he was also an outsider.

- Hosea taught in the Northern Kingdom known as Israel.
- Joel preached in the Southern KINGDOM known as Judah.

The words of Amos, one of the shepherds of Tekoa — what he saw concerning Israel ... - Amos 1:1 NIV

Amos lived in Tekoa, in Judah (in the South) but God told him to take his message to the residents of Israel (in the North).

- Strike 1: He's not a recognized prophet.
- Strike 2: He's not a resident of Israel.
- Strike 3: He's not trained in diplomacy.

Prophets were known to be blunt; but Amos comes close to abusing the privilege! Here's a word for Israel's wealthy ladies:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan on Mount Samaria, you women who oppress the poor and crush the needy and say to your husbands, "Bring us some drinks!" - Amos 4:1 NIV

Imagine me preaching that way: Hear this word you cows of Conway! You bovine of Burlington! You steers of Stanwood! I could go on: Angus of Anacortes. Heifers of Hamilton? Milkers of Mount Vernon?

You gotta like Amos; a shepherd with a fig orchard one day; a fearless, historical messenger of God's judgment the next.

TIMES WERE GOOD!

- Prosperity in Israel was at an all-time high.
- Threats from enemies were at an all-time low.

God didn't object to their riches; He blessed 'em with wealth. But, He was angry at how they had become greedy, selfish, and unjust; the rich were actually oppressing the impoverished:

- Overtaxation produced illegal and immoral slavery.
- The legal system was manipulated against the poor.

For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath. They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. – Amos 2:6-7 NIV

Israel was guilty of idol worship and sexual sins, but the major gripe of this minor prophet was: Don't oppress or ignore the poor

HOW ABOUT US?

Q: Do we ignore or oppress the poor?

A: Not really. Our constitution has built-in safeguards against institutional oppression and discrimination.

There are impediments to coming out of poverty:

- The legal and the education systems favor the wealthy.
- Lotteries tend to take advantage of the disadvantaged.

But this is such a far cry from the audience Amos spoke to. And it's something we can be both proud of and thankful for.

Then there're charities and churches to fill in more gaps. As a church we sponsor: Op. Xmas Child, Friendship House, Love Inc, Youth Dynamics, Neighbors in Need, Crisis Pregnancy, missions, Helping Hands, and the Gideons.

- And we're gearing up to launch a new Lend-a-Hand ministry.
- Amos would like us; we don't ignore the poor.

Q: But the question is: Do YOU oppress or ignore the poor?

Because our society/churches do so much to help the needy, it's easy to disconnect from a personal sense of responsibility.

But each of us holds some type of bias. We tend to marginalize the weak; we don't usually ascribe the same weight of importance to the poor as we do the wealthy and the accomplished.

THREE "C" ATTITUDES

There are three attitudes we can take toward the needy:

1. We can be callous to the needs of others.

This is an indifferent, apathetic, unconcerned attitude:

"They do not know how to do right," declares the LORD, "who hoard plunder and loot in their fortresses." - Amos 3:10 NIV

- I have my own needs to take care of.
- I wouldn't even know where to start.
- My little bit can't change anything.

It's amazing how our contributions do add up to accomplish some really great, life-changing things for the less-fortunate.

- Think about that mountain of Christmas Child boxes.

The callous heart is more interested in satisfying its own desires than in helping others obtain the necessities of life.

I spent four days in downtown Seattle recently. There're beggars all over the place. I mostly just tried to ignore them. But there was this one who really bugged me.

2. We can be contemptuous to the needs of others.

This is a condescending, condemning, cantankerous attitude:

- Look at 'em; they don't deserve help.
- They made the bed, let 'em lay in it.
- They'll just waste whatever they get.

There was this one beggar; same spot everyday; dirty; unshaven; squatting with a turned-over baseball cap for money. But he had a Starbuck's latte, a cigarette, and a bag of Doritos. I had a contemptuous, cantankerous attitude toward that one. Yet, I didn't know his story, his background, or his history.

All I thought about was what Paul told the Thessalonians:

If a man will not work, he shall not eat. - 2 Thessalonians 3:9 NIV

And we do need to use wisdom to discern the legitimate needs of the less-fortunate from the false needs of the irresponsible.

- But situations can be grey; and we can't help everyone.

It's a matter of personal judgment. And whether that judgment is correct or mistaken, a right heart has value in the Lord's eyes.

A few years ago one of our Sunday school teachers took her young class across the street with a box of food for a man with one of those "Will work for food" signs. He looked through the box and got mad and swore at them, because there was only food in there ... Okay children, we've extended enough love here!

The contemptuous heart sees prosperity as a type of morality gauge and therefore sees the needy as second class people.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them.
Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream! -
Amos 5:22-24 NIV

Amos knew that the people of Israel didn't love God because they didn't show love to the less fortunate. This is a fundamental principle of the Christian faith:

- A sincere love for God produces a love for other people.
- If we don't have the first one we don't have the second.

3. We can be compassionate to the needs of others.

This is a caring, concerned, Christ-like attitude:

Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. - Amos 5:14 NIV

The way we treat the less-fortunate - because they can't give us anything in return - reflects our true character.

- Donations of time and assets assist charities.
- Offerings allow us to partner with a ministry.

And we should always be watching for the people who have fallen through the cracks of government, charities, and churches.

There was one beggar in Seattle who was blind. I watched him feel and sort the coins in box cup; so everywhere I went I saved my change, so I could give him a big ol' handful.

Because He has blessed us, it is both our joy and our obligation to bless others as He leads us with wisdom and discernment.

Amos' message had no impact whatsoever on Israel. And just as he prophesied (6:14) they were oppressed by their enemy.

Q: What kind of impact will his message have on you?