

Amos 5:11-14, 21, 23-24

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. 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. Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. 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. I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Luke 16:13-15 (New Revised Standard Version)

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

When I was a student, I remember doing pretty well on the first exam,
and then taking that as a sign that it was going to be an easy "A",
but as it turned out, that really wasn't the case.

The 8th century BC was a time of relative peace in Northern Israel,
and a comfortable season of prosperity with the economy doing well,
which the nation's leaders took to be a clear sign
that God must be pleased and satisfied with them,
at least until the prophet Amos came along.

The prophet Amos had been a farmer in the Southern part of Israel
until God called him to proclaim a very hard and unwelcome message
which the religious leaders demanded that he take somewhere else.

As Amos sharply pointed out, the nation of Israel had become corrupt.
They were cheating, exploiting and abusing the poor and powerless,
and clearly turned against the ways and justice of the Lord God,
**and that hearing the desperate cries of the weak and impoverished,
the harsh hammer of the Lord's judgment would be coming down hard.**

The message that God gave Amos and other prophets to proclaim,
was that the success and the prosperity the nation was enjoying,
they were not God's reward for doing things right and well.

It was not that God was blessing them for their faithful obedience,
but actually their prosperity and wealth came as ill-gotten gains
from having corrupted, cheated and manipulated the system
so to exploit and steal from the poor and powerless.

His message: don't steal & then piously, thank God for blessing you,
any more than its appropriate to cheat on an exam
and then praise the Lord because it got you an "A".

The leaders of Israel tried to silence Amos by driving him away
because he kept insisting that God demands true justice & mercy.

Amos pointed out that the same God who had heard and responded
to the cries of the people when under cruel Egyptian bondage,
was still a God of justice, and his judgment was coming, vs. 11-12

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.

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.

In making compromises for worldly success, comfort and prosperity,
the nation had turned aside from the ways and justice of the Lord.

Greed and materialism had become idols of those new gods.

Therefore they wouldn't get to live in the mansions they had built,
nor would they drink from the pleasant vineyards they had planted,
for having corrupted the Promised Land that was given by God,
because of their idols of injustice, exploitation & greed,
the nation would be conquered & then scattered into exile.

Amos warned them that their prosperity came not as God's blessing,
but though greed, decadence and injustice had made them wealthy,
it's really just the foul fruit of their idolatry & corruption.

Their desire for ease, prosperity and worldly success
had come to matter more to them than faithfulness to God,
for if they had been walking in obedience with God,
then they would have had compassion for the poor
and would not exploit them for their own gain...

... and therefore their songs of praise and religious rituals
were a lie, their worship a farce & offensive to God, vs. 21, 23-24

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Take away from me the noise
of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an
ever-flowing stream.

In 722 BC, the Assyrian army conquered & destroyed Northern Israel
just as Amos & other prophets had been warning the nation all along.

The prophet's message was radical, harsh, difficult and clear ---
be wary of wealth, success and prosperity, for it can be enticing,
it can lead to an idolatry of greed and materialism,
and to the worship of success rather than the Lord.

So don't judge the nation's spiritual health and wholeness,
and don't look to the material possessions of the wealthy
as necessary a sign of God's favor, approval & blessing,

**but rather look to their just & merciful treatment of the powerless,
which is exactly the message and ministry that Jesus proclaimed.**

Moving ahead to the first century, and the time of Jesus,
the Pharisees had fallen into a false theology of prosperity,
that assumed worldly achievement, wealth and success
were surely the signs of God's favor and blessing,
and could be taken to mean as definite proof
that you're doing things righteously & well.

The Pharisees assumed and taught
that you could simply look at anybody's situation in life
and since you could tell whether or not God was rewarding them,
that should guide your treatment of them.

If someone was poor, sick, unlucky or suffering,
then you knew that God was not pleased but rejecting them,
and that to help them or to show compassion toward them
would be to interfere
with God's just judgment and punishment...

... therefore they rejected
the notion of reaching out to sinners with love and compassion.

The Pharisees fell into the worship of a false god of prosperity
who rewards appropriate behavior with material blessings,
who punishes & rejects sinners with sickness and poverty...
... and they somehow missed or skipped over the parts of the Bible
about the God who heard the cries of the slaves in bondage,
and who loves and welcomes the lost, the struggling & outcast.

They rejected, and even ridiculed the ministry & message of Jesus,
who did seek out the lost sinners, the suffering and outcasts,
and who warned against the idolatry of greed & materialism
that can blunt, diminish & distract from our love of God.

In response to the Pharisees' rejection and ridicule,
to their false, self-serving theology of success and prosperity,
Jesus warns that wealth is not always really a blessing
if it leads to an idolatry of greed and corrupt selfishness, vs. 13
serve both *God and wealth*"

"You cannot

The Amos passage and what Jesus said are really about idolatry ---
the seductive power of success, accomplishment, possessions,
that can pull and weaken our attention & focus away from God.

Idolatry is not just bowing down to a graven image or to a statue.
It is whenever we place **anything before God in our lives,**
and can be **anything that matters more to us than the Lord.**

**Idolatry is when anything holds our efforts or attention more than
faithfully hearing & obeying God's will and desire for our lives.**

It's not that our compassion
or our treatment of the poor and needy buys us a seat in heaven,
but neither can we ignore and not care about human need,
any more than Jesus did, if we are walking with him.

Our mercy and compassion are one measure of our spiritual health-
- and the thing is, in choosing who or what we will serve
we are actually choosing **who we will be,**
and what sort of church we will become.

If we are living in a true and growing grace-relationship with God,
then the gracious love and abundant blessings we have received
will just have to spill over and leak out into our walk of faith.

The challenge and risk is that
the idolatry of materialism & greed **is pervasive and insidious,**
for we live in a corrupt and broken world far from God's ways,
& we can be almost unaware of the compromises we're making.

We each one decide **how we choose to use** our lives and our resources,
focused primarily on acquiring more wealth and worldly security,
or choosing to respond to God's blessings and grace
through our faithful stewardship of God's abundance,
and using every opportunity to do good and blessing.

**Yes, most of us really do want to be more faithful disciples,
and we do want Jesus to be our true Lord and Master
even over our money, our time and all our resources.**

But the stark reality and difficult truth is,
the attractive glitter & glitz that this world has to offer
is a spiritual struggle we'll battle so long as we live...
... and that is the main point and purpose of Christian stewardship.

So how we can overcome & defeat the polluting toxins of our culture
of materialism, consumerism, selfishness, our fear of scarcity?
**By recognizing the Lordship of Jesus Christ over all we possess,
including life itself – our time, our talents and our resources,
as we more faithfully live out the blessings of God as intended.**

Used appropriately, creatively, generously and wisely,
our life's resources can all serve to honor and glorify God

and accomplish good and meaningful things in this world,
as a sign that we are truly offering our whole selves.

I'm reminded of how I saw offerings presented when I was in Ghana.

A huge plastic tub was set in front of the congregation,
and we'd stand and dance to the music of lively praise.

We'd wave handkerchiefs, with everybody dancing from our pews,
as we circled the church until finally passing by the tub up front.
Then with great flourish drop our offerings into the tub,
as a visible and joyful sign of **an offering of ourselves.**

**The whole congregation would be alive with exuberant joy,
and how Lord our God delights and loves a cheerful giver!**

So to be practical and specific, **today we are each being asked
to consider** our stewardship and response to God's blessings,
from the context of God's overwhelming goodness to us all,

**and how we each intend & plan to support the work of this church
through the faithful giving of our money, time and talents.**

This is a season of renewed hope & promise in the life of this church,
for there are so many ways that God is blessing our ministries,
and **opportunities for us to do more and better abound.**

So as we consider our pledge of money & service **for this coming year,**
let us first commit ourselves afresh, wholly and entirely to God -
for **if we** are complacent and taking God's gifts for granted,
or **if we** have not first submitted our lives to God's rule
then of course we'll be unwilling & unable to give joyfully & freely.

Now that does not mean
that our contributions equate to our commitment to Christ,

but, to some degree our giving does reflect our grateful response
to the blessings we have first received as **a gift from God** -
& our desire to grow deeper in our **walk of faith with God.**

**To pledge is an opportunity to refresh and renew that commitment,
and to self-examine and test if my life is in synch with my faith.**

You see, it's really isn't the money, certainly not the amount,
but rather, the exuberant joy of giving, participating with God-
- and the money, it's only a symbol of the contents of our hearts.

So when we bring our pledge cards up to the front,
the amount on the card is just to help with budget planning,
the more important thing that happens today,
is that we all get up from our comfortable seats,
**that as we are moving and physically presenting our bodies,
it's to demonstrate that we offer our whole selves before God.**

So even if you've already sent in your pledge,
if you are able, please still come up to the front
as a sign of responding to God by offering yourself...
... and let that symbolize gratefully-joyfully presenting
to God all that we have, all that we value, and all that we are.

**Let that be a symbol of gratefully-joyfully presenting ourselves,
declaring I want to grow spiritually, for Jesus to be 1st in my life,
and I want to participate in whatever God is up to in this place...**

...for somehow, someday God's calling all of us to respond to his love.

The Apostle Paul explains it this way, Romans 12:2 (The Message)

Embracing what *God* does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on *God*.

You'll be changed from the inside out, **for *God* brings the best out of you.**