

Amos (3/3): 5:1-27

Introduction:

Today's passage is an important one. It communicates the heart of the Northern Kingdom's failures. It speaks to the power their decisions have--to return to the Lord, or to keep turned away from Him--and what will happen to them depending on the choice that they make. It's taken up in the New Testament, and it's been taken up by people throughout history as the heart of what God's People ought to care about. It speaks of justice, and what that really is, as far as God's concerned. It's a passage that...lingers, you know? It lingers.

This is the last time we'll spend looking at Amos, and it's a great passage to move on from, because it cuts to the root of Israel's failure, and really draws us back to the heart of God as Jesus reveals it.

I want to talk about it all! So let's see what we can do. First, let's pray.

Prayer:

Way Off the Mark:

At its most basic, today's passage is about how far off the mark Israel has strayed.

God tells Israel that their worship, their ceremony was

meaningless. And it was meaningless because it neglected their responsibilities to each other, and to Him. It was abusive of the poor, and it treated pagan false-gods as if they were equal to Yahweh. It was abusive of the poor, and it treated pagan false-gods as if they were equal to Yahweh.

God says this:

**21 “I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.**

**22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and
grain offerings,**

I will not accept them.

**Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.**

23 Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river,

righteousness like a never-failing stream!

25 “Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings

forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?

26 Or lifted up the shrine of Molek

and the star of your god Rephan,

their idols—which you made for yourselves.

**27 Therefore I will send you into exile beyond
Damascus,”**

says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty.

To say their worship was abusive of the poor, and it treated pagan false-gods as if they were equal to Yahweh is to say that their way of life has ignored their relationship responsibilities. It has ignored their relationship responsibilities.

Their way of life is unjust, and it is idolatrous. They've become unjust, as a society, and idolatrous, as a People. They've ignored their relationship responsibilities: To God, and to each other.

Ignored Relationship Responsibilities: An Unjust Society

And it's not *so much* that Israel is just abusing the poor, it's that those with power are gathering more for themselves, while they assert their power over others. They're gathering more for themselves, even as they take it from others. They're making the poor poorer, even as they buttress up their own wealth and comfort.

And the catch-all term that God uses to talk about the way the Northern Kingdom has completely rejected their relationship responsibilities to others is their lack of justice.

He says,

***There are those who turn justice into bitterness
and cast righteousness to the ground.***

There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth.

There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

And it's clear from things Amos says that this isn't just, you know, poor on poor violence, poor on poor manipulation, poor on poor crime, their society is one in which those who "have" shore up their own plenty, while they squeeze more from those who "don't have." The privileged use their privilege for themselves; their blessing for their own. Amos says:

***You levy a straw tax on the poor
and impose a tax on their grain.
Therefore, though you have built stone mansions,
you will not live in them;
though you have planted lush vineyards,
you will not drink their wine.
For I know how many are your offenses
and how great your sins.***

He says,

***Seek good, not evil,
that you may live.***

***Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you,
just as you say he is.
Hate evil, love good;
maintain justice in the courts.
Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy
on the remnant of Joseph.***

And in saying this, Amos is making it clear that those with power, as far as God is concerned, are seeking evil and loving evil, rather than seeking and loving good.

And the very real, very practical form this “evil” takes is a disregard for justice.

On Justice:

Justice is something that always comes up when people talk about what God, in the Old Testament cares about.

And why not, right? Because Amos is a book about God’s demand that His People act with justice.

But the word “justice,” most of the time we talk about it, gets corrupted; flipped on its own head. We talk about the need to “bring someone to justice,” the need to “administer justice,” to “provide justice.” In all these cases, what we most emphasize is punishment. Our deep need to make sure that those who break the law make restitution for their crimes. The Church has often lifted this up as one of God’s

great character attributes; that God is just, by which we mean, fairly distributing reward, fairly distributing punishment.

The problem is that forgiveness, which we say is at the heart of what it means to follow Jesus, “the image of the invisible God,” as Paul puts it, is the opposite of this. If justice, as we think of it, is making sure people get what is due them, forgiveness is making sure that they don’t.

Forgiveness means that we eat the costs of what’s done to us, absorb the hurt of what’s done to us, don’t demand punishment. Forgiveness means not getting paid back; which makes sense because of course, we can’t go back in time. We can’t make up for any sin, even if our courts give sins cash value and force people to pay us money or die for us, then say “justice was done.” But whatever was done, it wasn’t justice; it was retribution. But nothing is ever really made up for; time only moves forward, and nothing is ever undone. Jesus paid our ransom, freeing us from the devil and death, not our debt; debts can’t be both paid and forgiven. That was written off as a loss, which God ate, because God isn’t a grudge holder, waiting to punish whoever deserves it. God us unjust; He’s merciful.

And as far as Amos presents it, justice isn’t an eternal character quality of God, but rather a quality present or absent in their society’s structure. It’s when people with

privilege, means, and cash make sure that those without them aren't kept down. Justice was making sure that all of society, but especially the economic and political systems that affected people's lives, were kind, and the poor weren't required to pay taxes on their poverty or the courts set up so that the poor couldn't win their cases.

The fundamental disparity between what the rich could get and what the poor could get was supposed to be nothing; bribes, taxes, favors, laws that protected the wealthy and neglected the poor, these things were, as far as God was concerned, unjust.

Justice, as far as God explains it in Amos, is making sure society isn't rigged by those who can rig it, isn't bent toward an easier way for those with privilege and power, isn't wonderful if you have cash, and nothing if you don't. Justice isn't about making sure people are punished; it's about making sure society isn't punishing to those who live in it. It's about fairness and equality under the law and over the economy.

But the Northern Kingdom was unjust. Those who had the power to shape society had set it up for themselves, and against the poor and the powerless. But God won't allow Israel, to stand unless it can stand together; their society has fallen short of what it was meant to be, and it's been condemned. They're unjust.

Relationship Responsibilities: An Unrighteous Society

And they are also unrighteous. Righteousness, like justice, is about relationships; how we act or don't act while we're in them.

I've noted a hundred times in our decade together that righteousness isn't a gas, or a feeling, or some sort of transmittable vaccine that God gives His People.

Righteousness is covenant faithfulness; living up to the relationship expectations we have with those we're in covenant with. The covenant God made with Israel was a special relationship that God offered Abraham and his descendants, which in turn, Jesus has made available to us.

As Amos understood it, long before Jesus came, God's People were righteous when they kept their covenant obligations, followed Torah, lived out the Law; God was righteous when he kept his promises to them, too, kept his end of the bargain to bless and protect them if they lived up to theirs. The context was grace; grace that God has chosen Israel at all, grace that God had made promises to redeem all humanity through them, and continually offered mercy, forgiveness, a way to be human that could save the world.

This side of Jesus' work, we're righteous as we keep faith with Jesus, trust him, and lean on the Spirit God gave us to live up to his way of life.

But Amos reveals the basic truth of the Northern Kingdom, which is that all of them--the wealthy and powerful who have made an unjust society in which the poor are fodder for their comfort, and also the poor themselves--all of them are unrighteous, have rejected their covenant obligations, and it's best seen in their idolatry. They worship idols--statues that stand-in for gods that aren't even real. They've embraced every empty god worshipped by every neighbor around them, even the Canaanites that they mostly displaced.

***21 "I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.***

***22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and
grain offerings,***

I will not accept them.

***Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.***

23 Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river,

righteousness like a never-failing stream!

***25 "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings
forty years in the wilderness, people of Israel?***

***26 You have taken up the tabernacle of Molek
and the star of your god Rephan,
the idols you made to worship.***

***which you made for yourselves.
27 Therefore I will send you into exile beyond
Damascus,”
says the Lord, whose name is God Almighty.***

Their worship reveals what they really believe, which is that all these other empty gods--Rephan, Molek, Baal--Isreal thinks they're equal to Yahweh. But they're not; they're nothing. Israel believes that as long as they do all the right worship things, have all the right songs, the right ceremony, the right gatherings, that Yahweh won't mind if they treat other false-gods as His equals.

First of all, this is weak sauce anyway, because they've set up for themselves an alternative illegitimate Temple to Jerusalem's. But more importantly, God doesn't care about their pomp and circumstance, their attendance and ceremony and song; He never has. He didn't in the wilderness, he doesn't now. He cares about their relationship. He wants them to keep their covenant promises, just as he's continued to keep his, despite their faithlessness, their adultery.

They think if they just show up, approximate covenant faithfulness, Yahweh will be appeased the same way all these pagan false-gods will. But Yahweh isn't like them; Yahweh is real, Yahweh really cares about the covenant he made with Israel. God, like any marriage partner, wants their

affections, and attentions, and wants them to keep their promises, the same way He keeps His.

And when God, through Amos, says, “I will send you into exile beyond Damascus,” He’s basically saying, “I’ll give you the divorce you want.”

A Single & A Double Faithlessness:

So the poor, the underclass, the fodder for the lifestyles of the rich and powerful: They are just as at fault, when it comes to unrighteousness, as those who manipulate the law for gain and create an unjust society, as the manipulators. But the wealthy and powerful are doubly at fault; they’ve forgotten both the responsibilities they have to their community and their God. Or rather, the community they’ve used and the God they’ve ignored.

Born in the U.S.A.:

It’d be easy to jump here and talk about the society we live in, right? Talk about the haves & have-nots, the 30-year-long, but rapidly increasing, gap between the rich and the poor, and the way the laws of our country, if not our world, seem set up to protect those with means and power, moving more means and power their way, even as those without decrease in both areas.

For all the freedoms we have, and there are some powerful ones, ours is fundamentally an unjust society, one of

privatized profits, socialized costs, and structured sin. But when we move to issues of righteousness, we helpfully hit a wall.

Because America and the Northern Kingdom of Ancient Israel aren't parallel. The context isn't the same. You can't just apply what Amos says to the U.S.A., you know? God is talking to a unique thing, and we are a unique thing, but we're not unique in the same exact ways.

Our laws aren't Torah. Righteousness, which has the covenant God made with Israel at its heart, isn't a concern at all in our economy or our political system. These things just don't match. They still, just barely matched when Stephen lifted up Amos' words to the Sanhedrin; but even that was tenuous.

And yet, there are principles here that matter.

Relationships are at the heart of what Amos says.

Relationships are at the heart of what Amos says today. He ties together the idea that a faithful relationship with God affects relationships among the members of a community. You can't love good when it comes to people, and love evil when it comes to God. You can't create an evil society, and still be righteous, faithful to God's covenant, in your worship. Again, though, he's talking to Israel when he does this.

And they just had a different starting place than we do, a different charter. Israel was a community tied together in their relationship to God, a society founded by God; their society was meant to take its cues from the covenant God set before them.

Amos' society needed to reject idolatry; ours...may not. I don't know. That is, our society wasn't built on the idea that we'd never be idolatrous, right? Our society wasn't built on worship; Israel's was. Israel was meant to have a society that took into account its relationship and status with God at every single point of decision, every law, every system, every institution, was meant to be righteous, faithful to their relationship with God. Ours simply isn't and never was meant to be.

Our society is very different, founded in revolution, reshaped and formed over time by slavery, war, capital, religion and politics. We find ourselves here as "salt and light," seasoning because we're unlike the world around us, not because we're like it; bearing light because Christ shines in us, instead of reflecting back the darkness we've given up allegiance to.

And the truth of the matter is that if we're longing for a one-to-one parallel with the Northern Kingdom, or with Israel, we're better to look to the capital-C Church than to our country. Even that's a dangerous thing to try to do...but I'm a dangerous man.

But it's true, right? At least, God was talking to His People through Amos; and the Church, this side of Jesus, is where God's People are found.

So how do we apply Amos to the church?

Amos & The Church:

First, we remember, I think, that our relationships with others in the Church are directly tied to our relationship with God. They are sourced there. We're brothers and sisters in Christ, adopted together, siblings together.

But also, the quality of our relationships with each other does depend, in some real ways, how close or how far we are from the Lord. Our trust in Jesus and our dependance on the Spirit's guiding, these affect whether we're kind to one another, whether we treat each other as equals, whether we seek to minimize our own power and privilege in this society we call "church," or whether we instead, as Paul puts it, "devour each other."

So, to check our relationships with each other and to check our relationships with God may mean, sometimes, almost the same thing, just as justice and righteousness meant, to those powerful Israelites who had abandoned both, the same thing: a breakdown in their responsibilities to the relationship they had with God, and with their community.

Check in, you know? How is your relationship with God? How is it with others? Be honest about how these things are related. Idolatry and broken relationships are still tied together; what we worship alongside God will always affect those we worship God alongside.

Creating a Just Society:

We must also, this side of Jesus, remember God's deep concern for justice in Israel, and demand that our society also be one in which those with wealth and power don't use their means for themselves, but for the common good; we can reject participating in the things that privilege us, when others can't. We can speak against evil, and speak for good, and let Amos' standard, which Jesus actually embodied, be our same standard.

The problem is that we can't say to people, as the basis of our argument, "Do this because that's what people faithful to God do!" and expect anyone who doesn't care about God to get on board with us. Our society has a different starting place. I mean, Christians can be convinced that we're called to shape our society into one that is filled with justice for all kinds of reasons: Because Jesus tells us to care for the poor, the oppressed, those without rights; because Jesus was the ultimate example of those who didn't work hard to protect their power and privilege, but used it for others, and we model our lives on him; because we know that when Jesus

returns, all societies on earth will be reshaped into ones of equality and kindness and fairness, and so we're motivated, out of an affection for our country, to shape it like the way God will make it someday. That's patriotism, you know?

But we have to remember that we don't have the useful tool Israel had, which was the truth that God established our nation to bless the world. Instead, we have Jesus telling us to go out, and make disciples of all people; we have the charge to bear witness to Jesus everywhere we live, and shape the world as it is into the world as it will be.

But we can't be surprised when people think we're dumb for not making sure our privilege is protected, we can't be surprised when we discover society is rigged for those who have, we can't feel jealous if we discover we're a part of the have-nots, because so was Jesus, you know? And we can't be scared, as some Christians are, of joining in the work to create a just society others who disagree with us about God have already started, because ultimately, why should we expect anyone to agree with us about God? Frankly, they'll come around when they see the ways the Church uses our passion, our power, and our influence to shape society for the good of all, not just ourselves.

Conclusion:

Societies are just ways of organizing relationships. In a time in history when our national society is changing, rapidly and

not always for the good, it's up to the Church to be an alternative society that bears witness to justice and righteousness. I don't believe, until Jesus comes back, that righteousness will roll like a river over America; but wherever we go in faith it'll get soaked, at least, because we'll live for the Lord as faithfully as we can, and people will see it, and be influenced to think well of Christ. That will affect our community.

I am sure, though, that we can help nudge our nation--at least the our city, our state, our country--into something that is more just, one in which the laws aren't rigged, the poor aren't made always poorer, truth is valued, and those who are oppressed are lifted up.

And there's this, too: Just as our relationships in this alternative society we call the Church are deeply affected by how well we each are keeping faith with Christ, I think our drive to make our society one marked by justice is also deeply affected by how well we each are keeping faith with Christ. Idolatry, that great sign of Israel's turn away from righteousness, thrives in an unjust society. If we're skeptical about how worthwhile it is to bring fairness and equality and compassion into our laws and economies and politics, then it might reveal we value something about the way the world works far more than we value faithfulness. Maybe not, but it's something to think about. Let's continue on with this morning.