



Try to imagine a nation with the following characteristics: It's over 200 years old, wealthy and militarily powerful. A nation that's a major player in international trade, which has made many of its people wealthy, as seen by their large homes near major cities and second homes in the mountains. A nation where the rich and powerful have tremendous influence, even over what happens in courtrooms. This is also a very religious nation. Most polls show more than 80% of the people believe in God, and religious buildings are packed during major religious holidays. Finally, this is a nation where political leaders often use religion as a tool to influence the people, and it works because religion seems so important.

Can you imagine a nation like that? You probably can. You may think I'm talking about the U.S. at certain times in our history. That's why our study today is so interesting. I'm talking about the nation Israel 750 years before Christ. At this time, Israel was a prosperous nation. Her borders were secure. Religion flourished. People went in throngs to the shrines to offer sacrifices. They believed God was with them and He was the source of all the blessings they enjoyed.

In the midst of that God called a man named Amos to speak to His people. You'll find his book right after the book of Joel, which we looked at last week, and right before Obadiah, although that's probably not much help! Amos had a lot to say. His book is one of the longest of the Minor Prophets.

This is surprising because Amos wasn't a trained prophet. He didn't go to seminary to be a prophet. In 1:1 he calls himself *"one of the shepherds of Tekoa."* In 7:14 he says, *"I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees."* He sounds like some kind of uneducated country boy, but that's not entirely true. The word he uses for "shepherd" suggests he was a sheep breeder, perhaps even one who owned several large herds. He was also quite industrious and supplemented his income by growing sycamore figs in the nearby Jordan Valley. So he very well may have been a prosperous rancher. At the very least, he was a hardworking, industrious man, but he wasn't a preacher.

Even more surprising is he's from Tekoa. Tekoa was part of the southern kingdom of Judah, about 12 miles south of Jerusalem. It's kind of out in the middle of nowhere. But when God called him to prophesy, He tells him to go to the northern kingdom of Israel. So not only would he be doing something he was

untrained and unequipped to do, he'd be doing it in an unfamiliar and hostile place.

I love how God works. He takes the most unlikely and even ill-equipped people and gives them the most difficult assignments. You see it throughout Scripture. Moses was a murderer who got run out of Egypt. David was a shepherd boy, the least of Jesse's sons. Paul was a violent persecutor of Christians. He calls himself the chief of sinners. None of these were the kind of people we'd expect God to use. He does this so we won't depend on ourselves but on God. He doesn't want self-sufficient people; he wants God-sufficient people. He wants broken and dependent people. Some of you doubt God could ever use you. You don't feel worthy or adequate. That's good! The more you feel that way, the more God can use you! Just give your life over to Him and trust Him.

The lion roars

So this was a difficult assignment. To make it worse, Amos had a very difficult message to deliver. That comes through loud and clear right at the outset. Look at 1:2, *"The LORD roars from Zion and thunders from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds dry up, and the top of Carmel withers."* Have you ever seen or heard a lion roar, right in your face? It will get your attention. It's scary.

Several times he predicts Israel's downfall in graphic language. Listen to some of these descriptions: *"Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain"* (2:13). Later he says, *"The time will surely come when you will be taken away with hooks, the last of you with fishhooks"* (4:2). Here's my favorite. He says when that day comes, *"It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear, as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him"* (5:19).

God despises your worship

You might wonder, why does the lion roar? What made him so angry? There are a lot of things Amos says about that, but the most significant is this: God despises your worship. Listen to what God says through Amos right in the middle of the book. *"I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me. 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. Away with*

the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps” (5:21–23).

Does this bother you at all? The Bible tells us to worship the Lord. God established the very festivals He condemns here. He told them to bring these offerings. The Psalms tell us to sing to the Lord and praise Him with musical instruments. Worship isn't optional. God demands it, not because He needs it but because as the One who created us and redeemed us, He deserves it. So why would God say, “Stop bringing your offerings. Stop singing your songs”? It's like He's saying, “You should have stayed home today!”

I heard a story this week about a 7-year-old boy in Utah who decided he didn't want to go to church one Sunday. So he hopped in his parents car, pulled out of the driveway, and took off down the road. Not long after, local police began getting complaints about an erratic driver in a white Dodge. When deputies located the car and turned on their flashers, he refused to pull over and led police on a low-speed chase through the streets of the city. Eventually, he just pulled back into the driveway of his home, hopped out of the car, and ran into the garage. Later he told the police he didn't want to go to church because it was just too hot there.

There are a lot of reasons people don't want to go to church for worship. But why would God encourage that kind of thinking?

Why does God despise our worship?

A little background might help here. Solomon, David's son, ruled over the 12 tribes of Israel. But when Solomon died the 10 northern tribes rebelled and made Jeroboam king. Solomon's son, Rehoboam, ruled over only Judah and Benjamin in the south. Jeroboam had won the power struggle, but he had a problem. All the Jewish men, including those of the Northern Kingdom, were supposed to go to Jerusalem each year to offer sacrifices. But Jerusalem was in the southern kingdom. Jeroboam feared if they did that they'd eventually give their allegiance to Rehoboam. So he found a solution. He said, “Going all the way to Jerusalem is such a pain. I'm going to make things easier for you. Let's set up our own shrines. We've got some historic sites up here like Bethel and Gilgal. We'll worship there.” But, what would they worship at these phony shrines? He came up with the idea of golden calves (that's original!). He also had to get some religious professionals to work there but all the Levites were down south. So he sold the office of priest to non-Levites. It's like he invented his own religion of convenience, with just enough of the old in it to keep his customers happy.

With that in mind, you can understand what God means in chapter 4 when He says, *“Go to Bethel and sin; go to Gilgal and sin yet more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three years. Burn leavened bread as a thank offering and brag about your freewill offerings—boast about them, you*

Israelites, for this is what you love to do,' declares the Sovereign LORD” (verses 4–5). God labels all their religious activity as sin! They worshipped at Bethel and Gilgal when they were supposed to be in Jerusalem. They worship a golden calf idol instead of the living Lord. They even burned leavened bread, the very thing the Law forbade. And then they'd brag about their freewill offering, which was supposed to be just between them and God. God says: “For this is what you love to do.” It's like all this was for them; it made them feel so good about themselves.

You can see why God might despise this. And we have to be careful of the same thing. Churches like ours want to be relevant in our worship. We want to communicate effectively to our culture in our style of music, in the way our building looks, in the way we dress, even in our preaching. That's not always a bad thing. But we have to be careful. We're not selling a product here. We're not just trying to keep the customers happy. There's a fine line between communicating effectively to our culture and mimicking our culture. Pretty soon, we might reflect our culture more than the heart and passions of God. I'm not even convinced that's what people really want. Most unchurched people today aren't asking, “Why don't you look more like us?” Rather, they're asking, “Why don't you look more like Jesus?”

Even those of us on the inside fall into the same trap. When worship becomes mostly about **us** and meeting our needs then we make the same mistake the Israelites did. How many times do we ask after church, “How'd you like the worship today?” It sounds like we just walked out of a movie. “How'd you like it?” So much of that comes down to our own personal tastes. That's fine for the movies. When it comes to movies, I'm the consumer. That's what consumers do. But when we worship we're not consumers, rather we're offering something to God. The real question isn't, how'd I like it, but how'd God like it? Was He pleased with what I offered?

So that was one of the issues. But as important as all that is, that's still not the main reason God despised their worship.

God despises our worship when disconnected from love of neighbor

The real reason is found in the passage we looked at earlier. Go back to chapter 5 and read verses 21 and 24. *“I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me....But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!”* The implication is clear: somehow their worship was disconnected from justice. It's like they might have gotten the “love God” part right, but they forgot about the “love your neighbor as yourself” part. They forgot about justice. God wants justice to flow like a wild river. The fact is, you can't love God and ignore your neighbor.

Imagine if we had a worship leader who led us in worship every Sunday morning. One day you decide to come a little early and

discover the worship team is rehearsing before the service. As you watch the rehearsal you notice the worship leader treats the worship team horribly. He's demanding, impatient. He makes several crude remarks about the abilities of his team. They're all scared to death of him. He treats them like slaves. The shocking thing about this is he's so different when the actual worship service starts. He's so kind and gracious and worshipful. Tell me, how would that impact your experience of worship that morning?

That's how God must have felt when His people came to worship. God says, “I despise your worship because you neglect the poor and the needy around you. Instead of helping them, you take advantage of them.” This is the major theme of the book. Let me just show you a few of these passages.

Go back to chapter 1. Amos opens his book with several prophecies against Israel's neighbors. Look at v. 3. *“This is what the LORD says: 'For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not relent. Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth,...'”* He goes on and predicts their demise. The Israelites hated Damascus. They would have loved this. I'm sure people flocked to hear Amos. “Let's give this guy a radio show!”

But he wasn't done. He goes on and he indicts six more nations. Each time he begins with “This is what the Lord says...” Each time he repeats the formula, “For three sins...even for four, I will not relent.” God was judging these nations not for one sin, but for many sins; the fourth being the “last straw” that toppled God's patience. Again, all of these nations were Israel's enemies. They're saying “Amen! Preach it, Amos!”

But an interesting thing was happening. As God moved from one nation to the next, He was moving closer and closer to Israel, like a hawk circling its prey. When He got to the seventh nation, it was Judah He indicted. Judah—one of the tribes of Israel. Jerusalem was its capital. Although Israel was at odds with Judah, this was getting a bit too close to home! But they must have breathed a sigh of relief. You see, Judah was the seventh nation judged. Seven was the number of fullness or completion. “The sermon must be over now. God's judgment is complete, right?” Wrong. God adds another judgment against—guess who? *“This is what the LORD says: 'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines'”* (2:6–8). What's the problem? There's plenty of religion. They lie down at the altars. They go to the house of God. But they thought they could worship God and rip off the poor.

Now look also at 4:1. *“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!'”* If Amos had gone to seminary they probably would have taught him not to be so crude! He calls the women of Israel “cows.” At least they were good cows. Bashan was known for its excellent cattle. So he accuses these women of being like well-fed cattle who trample on the poor. Often times women serve as the conscience of a nation, but not here. Their utter selfishness and disregard for others is brought out by the fact that while they trample on the poor they order a drink! “I'd like a martini, please. Very dry. Oh, excuse me” (look down).

But it wasn't just the women. Injustice was rampant in their legal system. In chapter 5 he says, *“For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts”* (v. 12). Then the same disregard was found in the marketplace. Look at chapter 8. *“Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?'—skimping on the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat”* (verses 4–6). This kind of thing should have torn them up inside but instead he says in chapter 6 they sat around eating and listening to music in their big houses. *“You lie on beds adorned with ivory and lounge on your couches. You dine on choice lambs and fattened calves. You strum away on your harps like David and improvise on musical instruments. You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph”* (verses 4–6).

They should have known how much God cared about justice. It was right in the law of Moses. The Lord said in Exodus 23:6–9, *“Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits. Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty. Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the innocent. Do not oppress a foreigner; you yourselves know how it feels to be foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.”*

We should know it too. In His very first sermon, Jesus stood up in the synagogue and defined His mission: *“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor”* (Lk 4:18-19).

Does it surprise you to find such calls for justice in the Bible? This has nothing to do with politics. It's not an issue of being on the left or right. It's an issue of who God is. He's God of justice. You

can't worship the God of justice and ignore your neighbor. You see, worship is meant to change us; to change us into people who reflect the heart of God to our world. If we reflect something other than compassion and justice to the world, what will they think of God?

Mark Labberton has written a fine book called, *Dangerous Worship*. He tells of how one morning he taught his church from Psalm 27, which is all about how God delivers us from fear. He thought it was one of his better sermons. Later that week, he attended a dinner put on by the International Justice Mission where he met a young woman named Elizabeth. She was a beautiful 17-year-old Christian girl from Southeast Asia who spoke at the dinner. She grew up in a strong Christian home where she memorized Bible verses. But somehow at age 16 she spent a year in forced prostitution, enslaved in a squalid brothel. As she spoke, she described her room there. Over the bed where she was so brutally treated she had the words from Psalm 27 written on the wall, "*The Lord is my light and salvation, whom shall I fear?*"

Mark sat listening to her and he thought about her fears compared with the ones the people in his Bay Area church experienced the previous Sunday. He writes, "While we were trying to park our cars in Berkeley that morning, a task 'so totally horrible' as one person said to me recently, girls like Elizabeth were coming to worship in their settings too. She came before God in the windowless room in the brothel. We did so in our glass-walled sanctuary. We were hoping the teenagers we sent off to youth group actually got there. Once the car is parked, the teenagers are in youth group, the band is warmed up...what happens in our service has to have integrity, for the people in our church but also for Elizabeth. Somehow the God we name, the music we sing, the prayers we offer, and the Scriptures we hear, read and preached have to call us deeper into God's heart and deeper into the world for which Christ died."

If you're like me, you want to do something but you're not always sure what to do or how to go about it. You experience information overload when you hear about all the places in the world where people suffer unjustly. So maybe you conclude, "If I can't do everything, I won't do anything." You end up paralyzed.

As I was preparing this message God brought a recent experience to mind for me. Some of you know this summer Lynn and I moved to a new home in San Carlos. We've been enjoying it so much. We were able to get some new furniture. We love the neighborhood. But this week God brought to mind a pastor I met in Niger when I was there in August. I met him one Sunday

morning before church. He brought us out to show us his house right next to the church he pastored. Actually, first he showed us a new house he was building. It was made of cement blocks and it was about half-way done. He wasn't able to finish it because he didn't have the resources. Then he showed us the house he and his wife and five children live in now. It was a one-room hut with a thatched roof. It had a dirt floor. They cooked their meals on an open fire. Part of me wants to help him finish his house. Another part of me thinks, "Well, that's just the way it is there. He actually lives pretty well compared to some others I saw there. Whatever I do for him is just a drop in the bucket. Niger has bigger problems than that!" And that's true. So maybe I just do nothing.

But if we do nothing we run the risk of God saying to us the same thing He said to Israel—I despise your worship. How do we know what to do? Let me suggest two things. First, pray attentively. Ask God to open your eyes to the injustice around you. Ask Him to show you how you might have participated in this injustice. When you pray, what needs come to mind? What burdens you? What makes you mad? Sometimes it's not things happening in some far off country but right down the road. Second, engage thoughtfully. So often we appease our guilty conscience just by sending a check. But use your imagination. Be creative. What are some ways you can help that actually puts you into contact with people in need and allows you see them as real people with needs and wants just like you have?

Of course, again Jesus is our model in all of this. Remember He is the "lion of Judah." He has roared too. He's the one who said, "*Woe to you... You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former*" (Mt 23:23). But He's also the one who saw us, oppressed and enslaved to sin. He's the one who stripped Himself of glory and became a man, entering into our pain and suffering. He's the one who was unjustly tried and condemned. He's the one bore the punishment that God's justice demanded; the punishment we ourselves deserved. It's only because of the scandalous act of God in Christ, who "although he was rich yet for our sake became poor," have we who were lost been found. It's out of that life in God, both as the broken and redeemed, that we're called to extend mercy and justice to others.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1362-3