

Rebuked for Selfishness

SCRIPTURE: Amos 6:4-14

KEY VERSE: You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood. —Amos 6:12

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

- to learn what God had to say about economic injustice in ancient Israel;
- to consider God’s judgment against the greed and selfishness of individuals and nations that led to this injustice;
- to reflect upon ways individuals and nations practice greed and selfishness today; and
- to plan specific ways that we can work with God to overcome greed and selfishness in ourselves and in our communities.

Introducing the Scripture

In the first session of this series, we studied God’s judgment against social injustice and oppression. In the second, we learned about how God judges hypocrisy in religious practices. Now, in this third session, we will be studying **Amos 6** to learn about God’s judgment against greed and selfishness in everyday life, particularly in regard to the accumulation of wealth at the expense of others.

This chapter reveals vivid and specific details about the lifestyles of the wealthy elite in Israel and Judah. Apparently, the prophet had observed these people carefully and knew them well. He described the furniture in their houses, the food they ate, the music they liked, and, most importantly, their attitudes toward the poor.

The daily luxuries they enjoyed were built on the backs of others, who were forced to do without in order to support the extravagance of the rich. They had deluded themselves into thinking their prosperity was a divine blessing.

The truth, however, was quite the opposite. The disregard for the poor demonstrated by the rich and powerful

had enraged God, and they were about to be harshly judged and punished. Through Amos, God warned that they were on a path to destruction and tried to persuade them to change their ways while there was still time.

Then, like now, it was hard to talk to people—especially wealthy people—about the pitfalls of money and materialism. The idea that God was angry at the current state of economic affairs was not well received, particularly by those who benefitted most from the status quo. Amos had a difficult job to do, speaking God’s judgment to an affluent and comfortable people. But the very nature of the prophetic call requires speaking truth to power.

Examining the Scripture

Amos 6:1-3 is a warning to the wealthy elite of Israel. Amos used the term “Israel” to describe the people of both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Their material prosperity had led them to become complacent and overly comfortable. Although other surrounding nations (Calnah, Hamath Rabah, and Gath are mentioned in **Amos 6:2**) had already fallen to their enemies, the elite of Israel felt they were somehow exempt. Therefore, the prophet asked, “**Are you better than these kingdoms?**” (**Amos 6:2**).

Today, we might say that these people were in denial. The evidence that God judges individuals and nations was all around them; somehow, Israel’s leaders thought that they were above certain social justice elements of God’s law. This assumption would land them in serious trouble.

AMOS 6:4-6. Verses 4-6 offer an unflattering description of the elite. Their

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expensive tastes in furniture and food, as well as their frivolous leisure activities, were offensive to God. They lay on beds inlaid with ivory, the most expensive design available. They ate “**lambs from the flock and calves from the stall**” (v. 4), which were the choicest and most costly cuts of meat.

Amos also reported on the “**idle songs**” (v. 5) that were a part of this frivolous lifestyle. Members of the upper class created songs to entertain themselves at their feasts with music and singing. They sang trivial songs, and they compared their works to the psalms and worship music of David. The music that David had created was for the glory of God, but the people of Israel used their songs for revelry, making a mockery of this musical tradition. They only wanted to please themselves.¹

Like their furniture, food, and music, the rich people’s drinking was also indulgent and excessive. They drank wine directly from large bowls—a picture of excess—and anointed themselves with expensive oil in a mockery of religious ritual (v. 6).

In the midst of this self-indulgent lifestyle, no thought was given to the poor. As the rich feasted, others were suffering. They held no reverence for the legacies of their forebears. They gave no heed to the possibility of God’s judgment. Amos also wrote that they were “**not grieved over the ruin of Joseph**”—the downfall of Israel that had already begun, though they didn’t see it happening (v. 6). This was a tragic reversal of fortunes. Joseph, one of the forefathers of the Hebrew nations, had moved from suffering to great prosperity because he had demonstrated godliness in all of his circumstances. And now Israel was about to move from great prosperity to ruin because the people had shown no reverence for God.

AMOS 6:7-8. Verses 7-8 warn that the upper class’s greedy, self-indulgent lifestyle was not pleasing to God and only invited divine condemnation. While these people believed that their wealth and prosperity protected them, in reality they would be the “**first to go into exile**” (v. 7). They, who were so proud of being “first,” would also be the first to be exiled from their beloved homeland!

The impending punishment was certain. Amos wrote, “**The Lord God has sworn by himself**” (v. 8).

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Such an oath was serious business! God was profoundly angry. The “**pride of Jacob**” (v. 8), which in other contexts was mentioned as a positive thing (see **Psalm 47:4**), was now standing under judgment. Israel (the people of God) had disregarded God and the things of God, yet they had the audacity to be arrogant about being descendants of Jacob. For the Northern Kingdom of Israel, the “**pride of Jacob**” may have been their glorious past and the parts of their heritage of which they were so proud—their riches, wealth, and strength; their fortified cities and towns. The Southern Kingdom of Judah may have taken pride in the temple. And indeed, God had at one time given all of these things to the

people as blessings. But the gifts had been perverted. God despises blessings that, rather than being used for God’s purposes, become sources of arrogance and pride.²

God was disgusted with Israel and promised to “**deliver up the city and all that is in it**” (v. 8). The city referred to here was probably Samaria, the capital of Israel. “**All that is in it**” meant both the people and their possessions.

AMOS 6:9-10. God’s judgment would be swift and thorough. Even if the initial destruction left a few survivors, they too would die. Their remains would be carried out of their houses. No one would remain. The obliteration would be complete. The future of the comfortable elite was hopeless.

AMOS 6:11-12. These verses continue to describe the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. While Amos did not identify the human enemy whom God would use to accomplish this task, God would be the initiator: “**See, the LORD commands and the great house shall be shattered to bits, and the little house to pieces**” (v. 11).

Next, Amos posed two rhetorical questions to put into context the absurd and unnatural way the wealthy class was living: “**Do horses run on rocks? Does one plow the sea with oxen?**” (v. 12). The obvious answer to both of these questions is *of course not*.

What made this lifestyle so absurd? **Verse 12** explains, “**You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of**

righteousness into wormwood.” The lack of concern for the poor and the disregard for social justice displayed by the wealthy were violating God’s most basic rules for living in human community.

Justice and righteousness—the basic components of a life lived in right relationship with God and with others—are the moral foundation of God’s creation. The kind of greed that leads people to amass material wealth at the expense of others destroys this foundation and leads both individuals and entire nations to destruction.

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*, also known as Absinthe) is a highly poisonous plant. In the Bible, its bitterness is often used as a metaphor for sin. (See **Proverbs 5:3-6**; **Lamentations 3:13-19**; and **Revelation 8:10-11** for examples.) In this case, the sin of greed had poisoned the moral foundation upon which God’s chosen nation had been established.

AMOS 6:13-14. Verse 13 refers to a military invasion by King Jeroboam of Israel into the Transjordan, the region extending from the eastern bank of the Jordan River (see **2 Kings 14:25**). This had been a victory for Israel, but Amos mocked those who celebrated it.

“**You who rejoice over Lo-Debar**” (v. 13) contains a play on words. In Hebrew, the word for Lo-Debar sounds very similar to the word for “nothing.” The people were, in effect, rejoicing over nothing. Their conquest of these territories meant nothing to their future or to God.

Similarly, “Karnaim” is also a play on words. Referring to a military success, the people boasted, “**Have we not by our own strength captured Karnaim for ourselves?**” (v. 13). In addition to being the name of a town, Karnaim can be translated as “horns.” In his commentary on Amos, Donald E. Gowan explains that Amos was “using the fact that ‘horn’ was a common metaphor for strength to say that the people claim they have taken ‘strength’ by their own strength.”³

Without God, Israel would never have become a nation, much less risen to such military strength, but the people gave themselves all of the credit. Their pride and arrogance would prove to be fatal. As the wealthy and powerful elite of Israel boasted about their invasions of surrounding lands, God was raising up a nation to invade them and defeat them (v. 14).

Applying the Scripture

In the first two sessions in this series, we wrestled with the topic of social justice. The Scripture passage for this

session takes the issue in a direction that may hit more close to home. We are talking about money. Next to sex, money is arguably one of the most difficult topics to talk about in church. But the Bible does not shy away from the subject and neither should we. The prophets had much to say about money—and, for that matter, so did Jesus.

A difficult and often personal question that may arise as your group studies this Scripture is, “How much money is too much?” We can surely agree that it is wrong to earn money by exploiting others (even if we don’t always agree on what exploitation is), but what about money that is earned honestly? Is there a point at which wealth itself becomes sinful? And we can probably agree that intentional oppression is wrong, but what about unintentional or systemic oppression in which we are unknowingly complicit? Does God condemn that too?

Also, be prepared for the possibility of heated and emotional discussion about whether it is a sin to be wealthy or whether the true sin is greed and selfishness. Some may ask whether it is acceptable to have lots of money if we are sharing it and doing good things with it.

Any number of other questions may come up, such as, “Where does wealth come from?” Do all people have the opportunity to achieve a comfortable financial situation? Are poor people lazy or the victims of misfortune and injustice? Is God a socialist or a capitalist, or can we even use those terms to talk about biblical economic principles? Is wealth entirely the result of human factors like hard work, luck, and social privilege, or does God intervene to make or break the fortunes of individuals?

These are not easy questions! You are not going to answer them all in one session of Bible study. If they arise, encourage the participants to be open to God’s word on the sticky subject of money and see where the Spirit leads you, your group, and your community.

Be sensitive to the economic circumstances of the people in your group and how their experiences may shape their views. Exploring the connection between the material wealth of some and the poverty of others can be very difficult, particularly for those who are financially well off. It also can be difficult to think about the way economic class affects our relationships with others, including people in our own church families. But that is exactly what God, through the prophet Amos, challenges us to do. The conversations will not be easy, but this critical subject is well worth it.

Session Plans

These session plans are given as suggestions. The words **AND**, **OR**, or **AND/OR** between activities indicate alternate activities. Choose activities best suited for your particular group and time schedule. Feel free to adapt the suggestions to meet the needs and interests of your group.

GETTING READY FOR THE SESSION

- **Pray** for God's guidance as you prepare for this session.
- **Read Amos 6**, focusing on verses 4-14, and session 3 in *Journeys* and this Leader's Guide.
- **Consider** the best way to talk to your group about wealth, poverty, and the sin of greed.
- **Prepare** and **bring** an empty bottle with a skull and cross bones "poison" label on it. (You can make one yourself, or print out the symbol from the Internet.) **Make sure** that the mouth of the bottle is wide enough for a slip of paper to easily be inserted, and that the bottle itself is large enough to hold slips of paper from each participant, and that the bottle can be thrown out. (See "Closing the Session" for description of the activity.) **Prepare** and **bring** small slips of paper, one for each participant.
- If you plan to use the "Bed of Ivory" exercise, **plan** how you will set it up. For this activity to be most effective, there should be just enough chairs for each participant to take a seat. Will you need to prepare additional seating, such as folding chairs?
- For "A Voice from Our Community," **invite** someone from your community who can speak firsthand about the realities of wealth and poverty in your area. **Consider** homeless or formerly homeless people, people involved in food pantries or outreach ministries to the poor, economic justice activists, or anyone whose experiences and perspectives might be helpful for your group to hear.
- **Have available** Bibles; paper; pens or pencils; and either chalkboard and chalk, dry-erase board and markers, or newsprint and markers.

BEGINNING THE SESSION

(10 MINUTES)

- **Show** the group the "poison" bottle with the skull and cross bones label on it.
- **Pass** it around.
- **Ask:** Imagine that you found your child, or the child of someone you know well, swallowing the last drops

from this empty bottle. How would you feel? What would you do?

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read this session's key verse, **Amos 6:12** (p. 16 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask:** How do you think God feels when we spiritually poison ourselves?
- **Point out** that greed is a particularly dangerous spiritual poison that destroys lives, communities, and nations.

DEVELOPING THE SESSION

(40 MINUTES)

Bed of Ivory⁴ (5-10 min.)

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Amos 6:4-8** (pp. 17-18 in *Journeys*).
- **Ask** participants to get up from their seats and move any unused seating to the side of the meeting space (or, alternately, move to the additional seating that you have prepared).
- **Invite** a participant (preferably the tallest one) to lie down across as many seats as he or she can, stretching out as far as possible on the chairs—a metaphorical "bed of ivory."
- **Ask** the other participants to try to squeeze into the remaining seats.
- **Point out** that this is a representation of the economic disparity Amos encountered in ancient Israel.
- **Discuss** what it felt like for the first participant to lie on a "bed of ivory" while the others had to crowd into the other seats.
- **Discuss** whether or not such wealth disparity is in accordance with God's will and our own best interests.

OR

Living Large, Living Small (5-10 min.)

- **Ask** someone to read **Amos 6:4-8** (pp. 17-18 in *Journeys*).
- **Point out** that the lavish lifestyle described in this passage was enjoyed by only a few, at the expense of many, many others who went without.
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions:
 - Do you associate material wealth with moral goodness and poverty with moral failure? Why or why not? Is that a biblical way of thinking?
 - In what ways is economics a theological issue?
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about economic disparity in our world today?

- Is God judging our nation? Why or why not?
- Is God judging us as God's people? Why or why not?
- What changes could we make in our local church to handle the issue of money and material goods in a way that is more pleasing to God?

AND

A Voice from Our Community (10-15 min.)

- **Ask** a participant to read **Amos 6:11-14** (p. 20 in *Journeys*).
- **Invite** your guest speaker to share some of the ways that the poison of greed affects people in your community.
- **Point out** that both individual acts of greed and a corrupt social and political situation created economic disparities in ancient Israel.
- **Consider** how both individual acts of greed and corporate or systemic injustice create “poisonous wormwood” in our communities today as well.
- **Ask** your guest to talk about ways your church can be part of making positive changes in the area of economic justice.
- **Plan** specific ways you as individuals and as a church community can act to overcome the effects of this “poison” and begin to live more as God wants us to live.

OR

Beware the Wormwood (5-10 min.)

- **Ask** for a volunteer to read **Amos 6:11-14** (p. 20 in *Journeys*).
- **Discuss** the reasons for God's anger and judgment that are described in this passage of Scripture.
- **Consider** whether our nation today might be guilty of similar sins.
- **Lead** a discussion using these questions or ones of your own:
 - In what ways do we also turn “**justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood**” (v. 12)?
 - In what areas of our society do we find “wormwood” today?

- How is “wormwood” poisoning us as individuals, as a community, as a nation, and as a world?
- What is the “antidote” for our wormwood?
- How can we as individuals, as churches, and as a denomination play a role in being this antidote?
- **Point out** that it was not only individual acts of greed, but also a corrupt system, that created economic disparities in ancient Israel.
- **Consider** how both individual acts of greed and corporate or systemic injustice create “poisonous wormwood” in our communities today as well.
- **Ask** participants to name specific ways in which your church community can work to overcome greed and embrace justice and righteousness instead.
- **List** responses on the board or newsprint.

CLOSING THE SESSION**(5 MINUTES)**

- **Distribute** a slip of paper to each participant.
- **Instruct** participants to write down a personal or systemic injustice from which they have personally benefitted.
- **Pick up** your “poison” bottle and **pass it** around the group, asking each participant to put his or her slip of paper in the bottle.
- When the bottle comes back to you, **say** these words: “We will not drink this poison of greed. We will live as God intended—in justice, in righteousness, and in peace.” Then **throw** the bottle in a waste bin.
- **Close** with a prayer asking for God's guidance in helping you live “poison-free” lives that are blessings to your community.

NOTES

1. Matthew Henry, “Commentary on Amos 6,” *Matthew Henry's Complete Commentary on the Bible* (1706). Online at www.study-light.org/commentaries/mhm/view.cgi?bk=am&ch=6.

2. John Gill, “Commentary on Amos 6,” *The New John Gill Exposition of the Entire Bible* (1999). Online at www.study-light.org/commentaries/geb/view.cgi?bk=am&ch=6.

3. Donald E. Gowan, “The Book of Amos,” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 403.

4. This activity is adapted from “The Ten Chairs,” an exercise from “Teaching Economics as if People Mattered.” Online at www.teachingeconomics.org/content/index.php?topic=tenchairs.