

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

Hearts of Stone

Thanks to the American Baptist Home Mission Societies, members of the Church-in-the-Garden, Garden City, New York, participated in the Ecumenical Work Week in St. Bernard Parish and the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans in August of 2012. We all loved the experience of working with other Christians to help restore and rebuild this beloved yet fragile community. The people were so warm and welcoming and appreciative of the work we did. The fellowship was amazing. However, we couldn't help but be saddened by the fact that, even seven years after the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina, so many houses were still boarded up or destroyed and so few people have been able to return home.

Again and again we heard the local people's stories. They had experienced government neglect, unscrupulous contractors taking advance payments and then leaving town without doing repairs, so-called charitable organizations lining their pockets instead of helping the community, attempts to discourage people from returning home so that real estate developers could take over their land, and more.

Greed—both personal and systemic—has made a horrible situation much



worse. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina is just one example among many in our nation and our world in which the most vulnerable members of society have been made to suffer because of the greed and selfishness of others. No wonder God gets angry!

The behavior that the prophet Amos denounced was not much different from some behavior we see today. People still lie in luxurious “**beds of ivory**” (**Amos 6:4**) while others have no place to lay their heads. Even so, there is good news. God would not bother to warn people unless there was a possibility for change. Amos’s contemporaries had the option of making better choices, and so do we.

In fact, many people today *are* making better choices. The people we met and worked alongside in New Orleans were spending their time, money, and energy on a rebuilding effort that is slowly but surely bringing hope to devastated communities. Such self-sacrificial, loving work is very much a part of American Baptist life. Therefore, as we study this session’s Scripture passage, let us not minimize the harshness of the judgment. But let us also remember the hope that, with God’s help, we still can make a difference.

† AMOS 6:4-8

- 4 Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory,
and lounge on their couches,
and eat lambs from the flock,
and calves from the stall;
- 5 who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp,
and like David improvise on instruments of music;
- 6 who drink wine from bowls,
and anoint themselves with the finest oils,
but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!
- 7 Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile,
and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

Daily Bible Readings

**WEEK 3:
REBUKED FOR
SELFISHNESS**

June 15
(MONDAY)
*Full of Greed
Inside*
LUKE 11:37-42

June 16
(TUESDAY)
*A Large Income
with Injustice*
PROVERBS
16:1-11

June 17
(WEDNESDAY)
*Proclaiming
Christ Out
of Selfish
Ambition*
PHILIPPIANS
1:12-20

June 18
(THURSDAY)
*Guard against
All Kinds of
Greed*
LUKE 12:15-21

- 8 The Lord God has sworn by himself
 (says the LORD, the God of hosts):
 I abhor the pride of Jacob
 and hate his strongholds;
 and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it.

Bad News Comes to Comfortable People

These verses are a critical commentary on the wealthy elite of Israel and Judah. Amos seemed to know this lifestyle very well and described it in great detail—the style of furniture they had in their homes, the type of food they ate, the music they listened to, and the wine they drank.

In this text, Amos says that the wealthy lay in “**beds of ivory**” (v. 4). This refers to beds with ivory inlay that would have been very costly, the “top of the line” of the day. He says that they “**eat lambs from the flock and calves from the stall**” (v. 4). This meat would have been the choicest and most costly of all meats. In order to support this extravagance, others would have had to do without.



This luxurious lifestyle was accompanied by background music, or “**idle songs**” (v. 5), to which they improvised, flattering themselves that they had composed music that could rival the creations of the most famous of biblical harpists, King David. They drank wine from large bowls (v. 6) rather than from glasses or cups. Nothing but the best was acceptable for them. They likely felt a sense of entitlement to their lifestyle, but Amos was disturbed by their self-indulgence. He lamented that his people were “**not grieved over the ruin of Joseph**” (v. 6), the downfall of Israel that was soon to come.

In their excessive lifestyles, the leaders of both Israel and Judah had lost any sense of connection to the struggles from which they had come. They had forgotten or perhaps trivialized the suffering of their forebears. As philosopher and writer George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”¹ God’s people

had forgotten about how God had delivered them, and as a result they were about to face some of the same difficulties that their ancestors had endured.

Although the members of the elite thought their prosperity meant God was pleased with them, they were wrong. **Verses 7-8** describe the frightening judgment that would fall upon those wealthy folks—they would be the “**first to go into exile**” (v. 7). “**The Lord God has sworn by himself**” to carry out this judgment, Amos declares in **verse 8**. It was common for people to base their oaths in some authority, and there was no higher authority than God. This meant that the punishment was serious business. God was profoundly angry.

The precise meaning of “**pride of Jacob**” (v. 8) is unclear, but generally it is assumed to refer to the Hebrew people’s arrogance regarding their identity and all that they possessed, including the temple. The descendants of Jacob were God’s chosen nation, above all nations. But they loved their reputation more than the God who had given them that reputation (see also **Psalm 47:4**). God swore to “**deliver up the city and all that is in it**” (v. 8). The city is probably Samaria, the capital city of Israel. “**All that is in it**” means both the people and their possessions.

Verses 9-10 declare that no one will survive the coming attack. The destruction will be sweeping and comprehensive. This was clearly not good news for the people who thought they were doing everything right.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Are you “lying in a bed of ivory” while there are people in need around you?
- Do you believe it is a sin to value the accumulation of wealth? Why or why not?
- What changes should you make in your life concerning your use of money and material goods?

Daily Bible Readings

WEEK 3: REBUKED FOR SELFISHNESS

June 19

(FRIDAY)

*Turn My Heart
from Selfish
Gain*

PSALM 119:31-38

June 20

(SATURDAY)

*The Righteous
Are Generous*

PSALM 37:14-22

June 21

(SUNDAY)

The Idle Rich

AMOS 6:4-8, 11-14

† AMOS 6:11-14

- ¹¹ See, the LORD commands,
and the great house shall be shattered to bits,
and the little house to pieces.
- ¹² Do horses run on rocks?
Does one plow the sea with oxen?
But you have turned justice into poison
and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood—
- ¹³ you who rejoice in Lo-debar,
who say, “Have we not by our own strength
taken Karnaïm for ourselves?”
- ¹⁴ Indeed, I am raising up against you a nation,
O house of Israel, says the LORD, the God of hosts,
and they shall oppress you from Lebo-hamath
to the Wadi Arabah.

Beware the Wormwood!

The term “Israel” (v. 14) refers to the people of both the northern kingdom (Israel) and the southern kingdom (Judah), both of which comprised God’s chosen nation. Just as other nations that turned from God’s will had been destroyed, so too would the people of Israel be treated to God’s judgment and wrath (v. 11).

The prophet asks two questions in **verse 12**. The obvious answer to both questions is, “*Of course not.*” The upper class, blinded by their wealth and comfort, had been making absurd assumptions.

They were out of touch with God and how God’s world works. But why? The answer is found in this week’s key verse: “**You have turned justice into poison and the fruit of righteousness into wormwood**” (Amos 6:12).

A very poisonous plant, wormwood is a metaphor for sin. In this case, the sin of greed had poisoned the basic moral foundations upon which God had established God’s people. And that was the heart of the problem. The lack of concern for the poor and the absence of social



justice were perverting God's most basic rules for living in human community.

Justice and righteousness—some of the most basic elements of a life lived in right relationship with God and with others—are the moral foundation of God's creation. Greed that leads people to amass wealth at the expense of others destroys this foundation and ultimately leads to the destruction of the individual and the community.

God's salvation is based on justice and righteousness.

Verse 13 references a military invasion by King Jeroboam of Israel into Lo-Debar, a territory across the Jordan River, as well as the successful campaign to conquer the region of Karnaim. Although Israel reveled in these victories, Amos mocked them. The conquests meant nothing because the people had credited themselves and failed to acknowledge God in their victories. But without God, they could do nothing. As they boasted about their invasions of surrounding lands, God was preparing to send invaders against them (v. 14).

Just as material wealth cannot be trusted as a sure foundation for life, neither can military strength be counted on as a basis for security. Only God can save God's people, and God's salvation is based on justice and righteousness, not materialism, militarism, or greed.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- Can any man or woman truly claim to be “self-made”? Why or why not?
- Have you ever done anything “by your own strength”?
- How can we find balance between a healthy sense of self and the arrogance that edges God out of our lives?
- What do you think makes and keeps a nation safe and secure?

NOTE

1. George Santayana, *Reason in Common Sense*, Volume One of “The Life of Reason” (originally published by Charles Scribner's Sons, 1905). Online at www.gutenberg.org/files/15000/15000-h/vol1.html.