

Amos: The Need for Mercy
Sermon 5-6-18
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Amos 7:1-17

This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings). ²When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, "O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" ³The LORD relented concerning this; "It shall not be," said the LORD. ⁴This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. ⁵Then I said, "O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!" ⁶The LORD relented concerning this; "This also shall not be," said the Lord GOD. ⁷This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said, "See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; ⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

¹⁰Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. ¹¹For thus Amos has said, 'Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land.'" ¹²And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom." ¹⁴Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, ¹⁵and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' ¹⁶"Now therefore hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'" ¹⁷Therefore thus says the LORD: 'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'"

Message:

In January of 2017, an article was written by straitstimes.com noting a convenience store owner in China who decided to shame a rat. Yes, you heard correctly, a rat. This rat stole rice in the store and the convenience store owner caught it in the act. To teach the rat a lesson, the store owner strung all four of the rats legs apart and posted a note on the rats chest which reads, "I dare not do it again." This rat was still living in the midst of its punishment. Isn't it interesting how our need for justice can be a bit extreme? When we're wronged, we want other people to know how wrong they are and we want them to receive the proportional punishment. Sometimes the disproportional punishment. We want to be right and we want people to know how right we are. But do we have the right to judge such things? Do we have the right to tell people what they are doing is wrong? Do we have the right to punish them? Should we punish them? Is that justice?

The conversation Amos has with the Lord in the first part of the passage addresses this question, "what is justice for the offenses the people have committed against God? If things are to be made right with God, what do the people have to do or endure to make things right?" The Lord first showed Amos, "...he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king's mowings)." You may not be familiar with these phrases of "latter growth" and "king's mowings." Essentially, the King took the first of the grain crop from the fields. This is the "king's mowings." So the King got what he wanted first. Usually the best stuff. The latter growth usually refers to vegetable season in this region. So it's believed that this vision of the locusts coming, happens at the end of grain season and at the beginning of vegetable season. So the people don't get grain or vegetables. All the crops are destroyed. So in other words, they starve or have a famine. ²"When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, 'O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!' ³The LORD relented concerning this; 'It shall not be,' said the LORD." Whew! The Lord is not going to give this punishment. But then another vision comes, "the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land. ⁵Then I said, 'O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!' ⁶The LORD relented concerning this; 'This also shall not be,' said the Lord GOD." Why does Amos appeal to the smallness of the land of Jacob (AKA the Northern Kingdom/Israel)? Because if you think back to the Exodus from Egypt and even as far back as Abraham, God has always shown favor on this incredibly small group of people. God chose them and chose to deliver His vision through this small group of people compared to the rest of the world. God chose to save this small group of people on multiple occasions. God

chose to give this small group of people prosperous land. So Amos is appealing to this smallness once more. And on this second vision, God relents on the punishment again.

The third vision, "...the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. ⁸And the LORD said to me, 'Amos, what do you see?' And I said, 'A plumb line.' Then the Lord said, 'See, I am setting a plumb line in the midst of my people Israel; I will never again pass them by; ⁹the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate, and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste, and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword.'" Realize that there is no rebuttal from Amos on this third vision. In Amos' lack of response, he seems to imply that this punishment is justice for the sins of the people. You may be asking, "What's a plumb line?" Well...if you're not a carpenter or a mason, you probably won't understand it.



According to gotquestions.org, “A plumb line, also called a plummet, is a cord with a non-magnetic weight attached to one end. When the cord is held in such a way that the weight can dangle freely, an exact vertical can be determined. Painters and carpenters use plumb lines to keep their work straight. It is difficult, while in the middle of a project, to determine a true horizontal or vertical line without an objective measuring tool, so a plumb line is employed. A plumb line applies the law of gravity to find right angles, to indicate the most direct route from top to bottom, and to keep things plumb. A plumb line doesn’t change or move with the whims of the carpenter. It remains true, and all work must line up with it or risk being crooked.” As you see in the picture behind me it might look something like this to make sure pillars and walls are straight. Today, we use a “level” for this purpose. But what God is trying to communicate is that He has a standard for what is right with Him. And there is a line that should not be crossed. When the Lord says, “...I will never again pass them by...” He’s implying that in an act of mercy He has ignored or looked past the sins of Israel. Or if you recall the final plague in Egypt of the death of first-born children, the Israelites avoided this fate by putting lambs blood on their doors as instructed by the Lord. He passed them by and ignored their deserved judgment. But no longer, is God going to ignore the judgment deserved. And as we know, this third vision comes true for the Israelites eventually.

As Amos follows the Lord's instructions as a prophet to deliver this judgment and prediction of the punishment to Amaziah, I don't imagine this being a desirable task for Amos. Remember, prophets are not free. They don't desire this task. They are under compulsion to say and deliver these messages. They can't ignore what God is saying through them in fear of punishment. So imagine that Amos delivers this judgment with hesitancy, but attempting to be faithful to Lord. As Biblical Scholar Donald Gowan says, “Speaking the truth by no means guarantees acceptance, for the truth will be uncomfortable to someone, and if it disturbs the comfort of those in power it will produce serious opposition.” And it does produce serious opposition for Amos. He tells Amaziah. Amaziah says to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; ¹³but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.” The priest has the right to send Amos away, but notice that Amaziah doesn't deny the truth of what Amos is saying. The truth seems to just be too much for Amaziah and King Jeroboam to handle. To deny this prophesy is an indictment against God. So God doubles-down. “Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword, and your land shall be parceled out by line; you yourself shall die in an unclean land, and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.” Oh boy. These are not easy words to hear. And I imagine it just hardens the hearts of the

Northern Kingdom all the more. Isn't it interesting that the very institution that's supposed to be a representation of God's dwelling, is the institution denying God's voice through Amos? Institutions have their limitations. And can even distort what God is saying and doing. They can ignore the will of God. They can ignore the Kingdom vision. Even if they do claim to love God and serve the Lord. How often has the institution, the church, become shackles for what God wants to say and do? We are too busy maintaining what was rather than embracing what God wants to do. Listening to His voice and where He wants to lead us. I hate to say it, but at times, the Church of the Brethren limits what God wants to do in favor of Roberts Rules of Order and democracy. I hate to say it, but at times, Providence Church limits what God wants to do in favor of maintaining the status quo or what's comfortable. Like Amaziah, the truth and vision of the Lord is sometimes hard for us to hear. We don't want to listen. And so we deny it's truth. But maybe we need to have God's truth have its way so that He can be glorified and His Kingdom can come. Not our kingdom.

The interesting thing about our passage is that God doesn't offer forgiveness. God doesn't offer forgiveness. Amos asks for forgiveness, but the Lord doesn't offer it. It's one of the unique places in scripture where repentance doesn't lead to forgiveness. What Amos gets in his visions from the Lord, is mercy. At least in the first two visions. We sometimes use mercy and forgiveness interchangeably, but they're not the same. Forgiveness is letting go of the judgment deserved. It's releasing the judgment. It's not holding the indictment against the other any longer. Mercy, on the other hand, is withholding the punishment. So if you receive forgiveness, releasing you from the judgment also releases you from the punishment. Forgiveness entails mercy, but mercy doesn't entail forgiveness. In a sense, Amos settles for mercy in the first two visions. But by the third vision, Amos seems to understand that the people are beyond mercy. And therefore, discontinues pleading for forgiveness and mercy with God. The scripture may even imply that one day God will forgive the people, but at this juncture, forgiveness is not on the table. I know sometimes we have such a strong need for justice for those who wronged us, that we can't go to the place of forgiveness. And, I get that. I'm not necessarily supportive of that, but I understand why one would have a hard time forgiving. But maybe a good first step is to offer mercy. To withhold the punishment. To withhold vengeance. Not to say that the other party deserves mercy, but it is an act of compassion on your part. And it is a first step on the path to forgiveness and hopefully eventually reconciliation.

You may be asking, why doesn't God offer forgiveness in this scenario? Well...for one, the people of Israel are not repentant. Amos is pleading on their behalf, but it is apparent that Amaziah and King Jeroboam are not going to lead the

way on repentance. Two, forgiveness is not something the accused or the offender can control. If God is the one wronged, then God has to be the one to initiate forgiveness. It's not God's obligation to release us of our guilt. BUT, this is why Jesus came. What we often get confused is that we like to think that we are the ones that initiated reconciliation with God? That we are the ones in charge. But, just like the Israelites, we've tried to follow the laws and commandments, but we inevitably fail. So if the Old Testament showed us one big truth, it's that we can't make things right with God. We can't. We can't do anything to make things right with God. If there's a plumb line, we will never be able to meet God's standards. We will always fall short. So it's not us who can initiate the reconciliation with God. It's God who has to make the first move. And God initiated this reconciliation with all of creation through his son Jesus Christ. Jesus set the standard and He achieved justice for the judgment we deserve. With His ultimate sacrifice on the cross, He paid the debt of our sins. The debt of our wrongdoings. The things that we can't make right with God. So when we talk about accepting the gift of salvation that we have in Jesus Christ, it isn't about our initiation in this relationship with God. God is already chasing after us. He is chasing after each and every human. He is trying to speak into each and every one of our lives. All we have to do, is stop running. All we have to do, is listen. All we have to do, is be a willing servant. Not to be just merely slaves to an overbearing Father. But to experience the incredible love that this cosmic Father has for his sons and daughters. That even when we are lost, He wants to chase after us and show us the incredible love He has for each and every one of us.

This judgment and impending punishment upon the Israelite people is an attempt to set things right. The plumb line is to show the Israelites who's the one in charge. It's not you or I, if you didn't already figure it out. You can try to thwart what God wants to do. You can try to run away. You can try to disobey His commandments, but you will not have a pleasant experience. God wants us to be in-line with His will, not just for the sake of blindly obeying Him, but because He has a vision for us that we could never imagine. He has a compassion for us beyond our imagination. He wants good things for His children. He has a purpose and direction for each and every one of us. In a world where we distort justice for vengeance. In a world, where we ignore the "least of these." There is a deep need for mercy. There is a deep need for a relenting of our will to God's will. There is a deep need for church institutions to see beyond their own survival tactics and ask the Lord, "What do you want for us?" The Lord wants to give good things to His children. God wants to bring the lost back home. God wants all of creation to be reconciled to Him. The judgment expressed through Amos is an attempt to set the record straight. It's an attempt to make things right. It's an attempt to emphasize the one who is in charge. By the very fact that the book of Amos is part of the

Bible, tells us that the people experienced this judgment and punishment and didn't want to have us ever experience such heartache and trauma ever again. Even though we deserve judgment and punishment for our sins, we can take solace that there is one who already paid for our sins. If you haven't thanked Jesus for His sacrifice on the cross lately, I implore you to thank Him today. Because I don't think we can fathom the pain we avoided by having faith and belief in Him. That because of the grace and mercy of Christ, we can live on in the fullness of life. That when we made the decision to follow Jesus, we laid down the things that make for death, our sins, and we picked up the mantle of Christ. That we decided to wave that flag proudly and rejoice that we have a savior that is merciful and who does forgive. That even though we don't deserve such grand mercy and grace, we received it anyways. Thanks be to Jesus for all that He has done for us! For paying the price for our sins! Thanks be to Jesus that we can walk in freedom from sin and guilt and know that we have a loving God on our side. That God wants to make all things right! It would be so much worse if God gave up. If He didn't care anymore. We can complain about judgment, but what if He stopped caring about His creation. At least He wants to make things right with creation. And thanks be to Him that He took the initiation to do so. We are so far in debt to God, that we can't possibly pay it. And yet He paid the debt through His son Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God for the many and bountiful gifts that He has bestowed upon us! That unlike the Israelites, He offers us grace, mercy and forgiveness. Our God is a majestic God! Our God is a good God! Our God is great and mighty God! Amen.