

“Embracing an Urgently Needed Message”

Amos 8:4–7

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Anyone who preaches on Amos needs to have his head examined or at least her resume up-to-date! Amos himself doesn't fare so well in delivering his message, but then, he is an outsider, a man from the Southern Kingdom prophesying to the Northern Kingdom. How well would we respond to a Yankee criticizing our way of life down here in God's country? But the truth is Amos' message would be difficult to hear, no matter who proclaims it — for its first audience or for us — because it hits close to home. Amos doesn't go from preachin' to meddlin'. He starts out meddlin'! And yet, his message is urgently needed, so much so that we need to find a way to hear it.

Before diving into the text, it's important to understand a little bit about its context. Amos prophesies around the year 760 BCE, when Jeroboam II is King of Israel. It is a time of peace and prosperity in Israel. Assyria, to the east, and Egypt, to the southwest, are relatively weak and not threatening smaller empires like Israel. According to 2 Kings 14:25, Israel expands its territory during this time. The nation's wealth also grows, but its prosperity is built not just on peace but on the backs of the poor. Trickle-down economic theory has never worked because those at the top don't let much trickle down.

Amos has the unenviable task of addressing this reality, and his added challenge, as we have noted, is that he is an outsider. He is not a professional prophet nor is he wealthy. He is a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees (Amos 7:14–15). Yet God chooses him to deliver a message to wealthy Northern Kingdom leaders about how they have used their wealth to exploit the poor. As Isaiah says, God's thoughts and ways are not ours (Isaiah 55:8). We would not have chosen Amos!

But God does and the specific message Amos declares in our text is one he has declared before. Previously, he has said that because the

people have trampled on the poor and taken from them levies of grain, they will not live in the houses of hewn stone they have built, nor will they drink wine from the pleasant vineyards they have planted (Amos 5:11). In our reading, he says the Lord will not forget what they have done in trampling on the needy and bringing the poor to ruin. God will remember every detail of how in greed they have diminished the lives of others. To state the obvious, to be remembered in this way is not good.

But Amos does not speak simply in generalities that the ancient Israelites and some contemporary church folk might try to wiggle out of or dispute. He is very specific. These wealthy Israelites have made the ephah (a measurement for grain) small and the shekel (a weight used to measure silver or gold) great by using false balances. That is, they are selling less grain for more money, cheating people every way they can.

Furthermore, they are selling the sweepings of the wheat, the chaff, as grain. They are pushing their workers to work on the holy days while they rest. And worst of all, they are buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. In other words, when the poor get into debt, they force them into slavery.

Now, while we might agree that this is bad business practice, dishonest, immoral even, we might wonder if it is a clearcut spiritual wrong. Well, Leviticus 19:36 says, “You shall have honest balances, honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin...” Deuteronomy 25:16 says, “For all who do such things, all who act dishonestly (in regard to measurements), are abhorrent to the Lord your God.”

The biblical message is clear and consistent. These are not isolated verses cherry-picked to make a point. One of God’s central requirements for God’s people is that we treat others fairly and respectfully, and this includes the arena of business. To be deceitful to make more money is abhorrent to God. And to exploit those who already have very little exacerbates our moral and spiritual problem.

The reading from Luke may seem to give us an out, as Jesus uses the example of a shrewd manager with questionable business practices as a kind of model for faithfulness. It is one of the most difficult Jesus stories to interpret. You will note that I have chosen not to preach on it today, though I have before here — once was enough!

But Jesus is not talking about business ethics. Business is simply the context for his parable and the principle he lifts up is not dishonesty but creativity in dealing with a challenge. His followers will need to be innovative. And at the very end of the reading, he says we cannot serve God and wealth. This text leaves no room for economic exploitation.

Nor does the reading from Amos. Nor does any prophetic utterance leave much wiggle room about any concern. In his classic work *The Prophets*, Abraham Joshua Heschel says that prophets are “thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the marketplace... To us,” he says, “a single act of injustice — cheating in business, exploitation of the poor — is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us, injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets, it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them catastrophe, a threat to the world (pp. 3-4).”

This is the way Amos sees it. Dishonest and abusive business practices are not just a little problem to talk about some Wednesday night. They are serious concerns, abhorrent to God, cause for judgment! They not only offend God; they oppress people, especially the poor.

The question is — what does this have to do with us? Is this still a problem, and if so, is there anything we can do about it? There may be some who do not believe it is a problem, a least not one with which the church should be concerned. But the latter part of that perspective is refuted by scripture, as we have noted, the former part by reality.

Dana’s father worked in the tobacco world his entire career after serving in the Army in Korea. He has many tales about every part of that business, but one of the most fascinating is about a pile of tobacco at an auction that had a tombstone hidden in it. Why would someone do that? Well, you paid for the tobacco by weight, and grade, of course, and if no one noticed the tombstone, you’d pay a lot more for that pile. Talk about false balances! Yet it certainly wasn’t just the farmers or warehouse people in that industry who were sometimes dishonest.

In the small athletic store I co-owned in Louisville, Kentucky with a friend years ago, we had a third partner for the first year. Rick brought him in because he was a little older than us and had some business

experience — he was a salesman — but we really didn't know him that well. We got to know him pretty quickly. He told us we would skim ten percent of our earnings so as not to pay taxes or a percentage to the mall on those earnings. "Everybody does it," he said. I said, "I don't believe that, but even if they do, we will be the first business not to skim." Rick agreed, so our third partner started working in the store and pocketing his ten per cent. He also wanted to change our corporate tax status long past the date when it is legal to do that. Fortunately, we had a good partnership agreement, and thus were able to buy him out after one year.

These are just two examples, but we all know that there are still problematic business practices. And these practices aren't simply dishonest; they oppress people, especially poor people who suffer most when any cost, like the cost of gas or rent, goes up. Nearly forty million Americans live in poverty while the number of billionaires increases. The gap between rich and poor continues to grow, and it is no accident, nor is it an inevitable consequence of capitalism. It goes back to a basic human characteristic that no one has been able to root out — greed.

After the financial crisis in 2008, the former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, acknowledged that he had failed to recognize a flaw in our system — assuming that the self-interest of key players would be overridden by a concern for shareholders. In theological terms, he failed to account for greed. But it still existed and caused great harm, which it will again, because we took down some critical guardrails, and because of the human capacity for greed.

So, given this reality, while some may wonder if we still have a problem, others will wonder if there is anything we can do about it. Can we ever overcome greed? And will not big companies always do what they can to make as much as they can? A character like Henry Potter in "It's a Wonderful Life" is based on reality, as are the companies in films like "Michael Clayton" and "Erin Brockovich" which exploit people.

But not every company or executive functions without ethical concerns. After his years in the SAS, my father worked for a company owned by a Quaker family in Louisville that shaped its practices by ethical standards informed by Christian faith. They made money but didn't insist on obscene profit margins if they required a compromise in

beliefs. They treated employees well, paying them more than they had to. They promoted women and minorities long before most companies. They cared about the communities in which they had factories and did everything they could to remain in them, even when they could have moved their work overseas. There are businesses like this.

There are also corporate executives who take ethics seriously. The October 2003 issue of *Theology Today* includes an interview with Steven Reinemund who was then CEO of PepsiCo. The article explores the impact faith has on his work. He says his company still struggles with achieving diversity and practicing equal opportunity. Advertising is a nightmare in that they cannot control the behavior of celebrities they sign to represent their products. And pay scales are still top-heavy. Yet the fact that a CEO has struggled with these issues is encouraging.

“I think that if you are going to get up in the morning, saying, ‘My major objective today is to do the right thing,’” Reinemund says, “... that ... is... naïve. Instead... if you get up and say that you want your business to be successful and that you want to do it the right way, then you will do the right thing.” For example, he says PepsiCo tries to pursue recycling every way it can. Doing so is good business and ethics.

Reinemund sees his calling to be “allowing my faith to be strong enough that my actions are caring, correct, encouraging, and helpful to others in the success of our business.” That’s not a bad standard no matter what our position in no matter what line of employment. The ethics we are talking about — honesty, integrity, fairness — are needed in business, education, medicine, law, and every other line of work.

That is the point of Amos’ message, not just to name wrongdoing, but to help us do what is right, ever realizing that the genuineness of our faith is revealed not just in how we participate in church life, but in how we live each day, how we treat people we work and study with, how the poor are affected by our actions. There is no way to hear this message without discomfort. Amos is a meddler. But he is God’s meddler, and he is meddling to help us live more faithfully and make the world a better place. Surely we can find a way to embrace his message.