

The Minor Prophets
Lesson 17: Sins In Good Standing
(Amos 4)

Last week we looked at Amos's first of three messages that dealt with Israel's certain judgment. Amos traveling from Judah to deliver that message was like a person visiting the United States from another nation and pointing out everything that is wrong here. Perhaps many would not like it. And many didn't like what Amos was doing.

But, God has the right to use whatever servant He chooses to deliver His message wherever He pleases. No wonder Amaziah, the priest, told Amos to go home to Judah (Amos 7:12-13).

Message #2: Israel's sins denounced (Amos 4:1-13)

In this second message, the prophet Amos named three particular sins that were grieving the Lord and ruining the kingdom of Israel: **luxury** (4:1-3), **hypocrisy** (vv. 4-5), and **obstinacy** (vv. 6-13). They had the wrong values; their religious "revival" was a sham; and they had refused to listen to the warnings God had given them.

1. Luxury (4:1-3)

"Most of the luxuries and many of the so-called comforts of life are not only not indispensable, but positive hinderances to the elevation of man-kind." So wrote Henry David Thoreau in his classic book *Walden*; and his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his own journal, "Our expense is almost all for conformity. It is for cake that we all run in debt." Let's seek to answer some questions about luxury.

- a. **What is luxury?** The word *luxury* comes from a Latin word that means "excessive." It originally referred to plants that grow abundantly (our English word *luxurious*), but then it came to refer to people who have an abundance of money, time, and comfort, which they use for themselves as they live in aimless leisure. Whenever you are offered "deluxe service," that's the same Latin word: service above and beyond what you really need.
 - i. **It isn't a sin to be rich or to have the comforts of life, if this is God's will for you.** Abraham and David were wealthy men. Yet, they used what they had for God's glory. In the eyes of the people in the Third World, most of the citizens of the Western world, including the poor, are wealthy. What the Western world considers necessities are luxuries to the citizens of other nations; things like thermostat-controlled heat and air conditioning, refrigerators, automobiles, adequate medical care, telephones, and abundantly available electricity and fuel.
 - ii. Luxury doesn't mean owning abundant possessions so much as allowing possessions to own us. To live in luxury is to use what we have only for our enjoyment and to ignore the needs of others. It means being irresponsible of using it for the good of others and the glory of God.
- b. **Who was committing this sin?** "Hear this word, you cows of Bashan!" (v. 1 NKJV). Amos addresses the wives of the wealthy leaders of the land, people who had gotten rich by ruthlessly and illegally robbing others. These "society women" lounged around all day, drinking wine and telling their husbands what to do.

- i. Why did Amos, the farmer, use this image? Not because these women were overweight and looked like cows, but because by their sins they were fattening themselves up for the coming slaughter. Both they and their husbands were living in luxury, while the poor of the land were suffering because these same men had exploited them and robbed them of money and land.
- c. What will happen to them? What do farmers eventually do with cattle that have been fattened up? They lead them away to be killed and butchered. Amos described what would happen when the Assyrians invaded Israel. The Assyrians would capture these women and treat them like cattle.
 - i. The Assyrians practice was to put hooks in the noses or lower lips of their prisoners, attach ropes, and lead them away like animals, either to captivity or to death. This is what the enemy would do to the wealthy matrons Amos was addressing in his message.
 - ii. But note that their posterity would also be involved in this judgment (v. 2). These wealthy women no doubt wanted “the best” for their children, but by their selfish priorities and their sinful example, they were giving their children the worst.
 - iii. Their posterity had everything but a knowledge of the Lord; so, they too would be led off like animals to the slaughter.
 - iv. The wealthy younger generation of Israel had everything money could buy, but they didn’t have the things that money can’t buy, the things of the Lord that make life worth living
 - v. Paul wrote, “Command those who are rich in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life” (1 Tim. 6:17-19 NIV). Paul also quoted Jesus, who said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

2. Hypocrisy (4:4-5)

The prophet used “holy irony” when he spoke these words, for he later instructed them to do just the opposite (Amos 5:5). It’s as though a pastor today said to his congregation, “Sure, go ahead and attend church, but by attending, you’re only sinning more. Go and visit the summer Bible conferences, but by doing so, you will be transgressing more. Your heart isn’t serious about knowing God or doing His will. It’s all just playacting; it’s the popular thing to do, so you do it.”

- a. Bethel was a special place to the Jewish people because of its association with Abraham (Gen. 12:8; 13:3) and Jacob (28:10-22; 35:1-7). At one time the ark was kept at Bethel (Judg. 20:18-28), but in Amos’s day it was the site of “the king’s chapel,” where Amaziah, the priest, served (Amos 7:10).
- b. Gilgal was also important to Israel because that’s where Joshua and the people camped when they first entered the Promise Land (Josh. 4:19-20; 5:2-9). Unfortunately, both of these places had become shrines, where the people worshipped pagan gods while claiming to worship the Lord.
- c. On the surface, it looked as if Israel was experiencing a religious revival:
 - i. Crowds of people were flocking to the “holy places.”
 - ii. They were bringing their sacrifices and tithes (4:4; 5:21-22) and even singing songs of praise to the Lord (v. 23; 6:5; 8:3,10).

- iii. They offered sacrifices more frequently than the law required as if to prove how spiritual they were.
- iv. But their gifts and songs didn't impress the Lord, for He saw what was in their hearts; and the sin in their hearts made their sacrifices unacceptable.
 - Their sacrifices were unclean like offering leaven on the altar.
 - God doesn't want sacrifices of bulls and goats; He wants the obedience of our hearts.
 - If the heart isn't right with God, the sacrifice means nothing (Gen 4:1-7).
- v. Furthermore, they were proud of what they were doing and made sure everybody knew how generous they were to the Lord. They bragged about their freewill offerings, which were purely voluntary. It wasn't the Lord who got the glory!
- vi. The people of Israel "loved" going to religious meetings, but they didn't love the God they claimed to worship. They loved going to Bethel and Gilgal, it was the popular thing to do. But there was *no confession of sin, no brokenness before the Lord*, but only a religious event that made the participants feel good.
- d. The people of Amos's day didn't return home determined to help the poor, feed the hungry, and care for the widows and orphans. They went home with the same selfish hearts they had when they left home because their "worship" was only an empty ritual (Isa. 1:11-17).
- e. It's interesting that Amos mentioned music, because that's an important part of the church's worship. However, what the Jews thought was beautiful music, God considered nothing but "noise" (Amos 5:23).
- f. Some questions to ask today: Where is the prayer in this meeting? Is God getting the glory? Is there brokenness before Him? Does fruit remain or is it gone when the meeting is over?
- g. Whether it is evangelism, education, social action, world mission, or feeding the hungry, everything the church accomplishes for the Lord flows out of worship. If the fountainhead of worship is polluted, the church's entire ministry will be defiled.

Amos has dealt with two of the three sins that the Lord told him to condemn—luxury and hypocrisy; and now he deals with the third, obstinacy. God's people were rebellious and hard-hearted, refusing to obey the Lord.

3. Obstinacy (4:6-13)

Five times in this passage, Amos says to the people, "Yet you have not returned to Me" (4:6, 8, 9, 10, 11 NKJV). The people of Israel experienced God's discipline, but they wouldn't submit to His will; and yet they continued practicing their hypocritical religion! "Not everyone who says to Me 'Lord, Lord,' Shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven" (Matt. 7:21 NKJV).

God's covenant with the Jews clearly stated that He would bless them if they obeyed His law and would discipline them if they disobeyed (Deut. 27-29). God set before them life and death, blessing and cursing; and He urged them to choose life (30:19-20). Unfortunately, they spurned His love, rejected His warnings, and chose death.

Consider some of the disciplines that God sent to Israel to bring His people back to himself.

1) Famine (v. 6).

“Cleanness of teeth” simply means the people had no food to eat. So, their teeth didn’t get dirty (NIV paraphrases it “empty stomachs”). God’s covenant promised bumper crops if the people obeyed the Lord, but famine if they disobeyed. When farmers can’t grow crops, food is scarce, food prices go up, and people suffer and die. You would think this would move people to confess their sins and return to God, but Israel did not return to God.

2) Drought (vv. 7-8).

Instead of sending a general drought over the entire kingdom, God withheld the rain in different places from time to time, thus proving He was in control. This remarkable demonstration of God’s sovereign power should have reminded the Jews of what the covenant said about the promised rains (Lev. 26:18-20; Deut. 11:16-17; 28:23-24), but they paid no heed.

3) Destruction of crops (v. 9).

Even when God did allow them to grow fruits and vegetables, they weren’t grateful. So, He destroyed the crops with blight, mildew, and locust. Once again, God was being true to His covenant warnings (Deut. 28:38-42). The nation should not have been surprised.

4) Sickness (v. 10a).

One of God’s promises was that His people would not experience the dreadful diseases they saw in Egypt if they were faithful to obey His law. (Ex. 15:26); but if they rebelled against Him, they would suffer all the diseases of Egypt (Lev. 26:23-26; Deut. 28:21-21, 27-29, 35, 59-62). As with other disciplines, God keeps His word.

5) Defeat in war (v. 10b).

The Lord will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways” (Deut. 28:7 NKJV). What a promise for a small nation surrounded by huge empires! But the promise would only be fulfilled if the people were faithful to the Lord. If they disobeyed, they would be humiliated and defeated before their enemies. So terrible would be their defeat that dead bodies in the camps would not be given decent burial but would lie there and not rot. God kept His promise: The Assyrians conquered Israel and the Babylonians took Judah into captivity.

6) Catastrophe (v. 11).

We aren’t sure just what this calamity was. Perhaps it was an earthquake (Amos 1:1), or it may have been the devastating invasion of an army (2 Kings 10:32-33; 13:7). Whatever it was, it had to be something terrible for the Lord to compare it to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-25). The image of a stick pulled out of the fire suggests that the Lord intervened and saved them at the last minute (Zech. 3:2). They had been burned but not consumed. If so, then their ingratitude and hardness of heart was even more wicked.

7) Ultimate judgment (v. 12-13).

The kingdom of Israel had experienced famine, drought, blight, plagues, wars, and devastating catastrophes as God had tried to speak to His people and bring them to repentance. No matter what discipline He sent, they would not return to Him. What more could he do? He could come Himself and deal with them! "Prepare to meet thy God, O Israel!" (Amos 4:12) was not a call to repentance but an announcement that it was too late to repent. The Lord of Host (armies) Himself would come with the Assyrian hordes and take the people away like cattle being led to the slaughter (v. 2). "There will be wailing in all the vineyards, for I will pass through your midst" (5:17 NIV).

Amos ended his message with a doxology of praise to the Lord (4:13; see 5:8-9; 9:5-6). When a servant of God praises the Lord in the face of impending calamity, it shows he's a person of great faith (see Hab. 3:16-19). In this doxology, Amos reminds us that our God is the Creator, who can do anything, including making the earth out of nothing. He can turn dawn into darkness; He can tread upon the mountains, and nobody can hinder Him. He is also the omniscient God, who knows what we are thinking. Thus, there's nothing we can hide from him (Ps. 139:1-6). He is the Lord of Hosts, the God of the armies of heaven and earth!

This is the God who was coming to judge His people, and they were not prepared. But are God's people any more prepared today?

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1) In this message, Amos addresses luxury, hypocrisy and obstinacy. Which of these (if any) do you believe is a big problem in the churches of our culture today? Why?
- 2) Parents usually want the best for their children. What is "the best"?
- 3) How might a person in your church do religious activity in a "playacting" manner? When, if ever, have you done this?
- 4) When if ever, would there be a time for going to church when you don't feel like it?
- 5) When have you been broken before the Lord regarding your sin? How has that affected the way you have lived since then?
- 6) If a Christian were having a hard time cheerfully giving or sacrificing to the Lord, what should that person do?
- 7) Why is helping the poor and vulnerable an essential way of expressing our commitment to the Lord? Where does this fit into your life?
- 8) It became too late for Israel to repent. When, if ever, would it be too late for a person living now to repent? See Heb. 6:4-6; Luke 23:39-43.

Homework: Read Amos Chapter 5. Our study will be: **How To Avoid The Storm.**

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