

January 29, 2006

“Troublesome Signs” Amos 8:1-10

FCF: Question as to spiritual diagnostics

PROPOSITION: (anchor) Because the object of our worship is reflected in the shape of our lives,
(magnet) we must then closely examine the shape our life is taking.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

Computers are the blessing and bane of our age. Ah, the care they require – programs to scan and diagnose problems buried deep before they cause havoc. It’s a dangerous world filled with viruses, worms, and spyware. My computer gives me more reports on these things than I can digest. But at least I’m secure. I know I’m covered.

But what about my heart? What program can I load there to scan and diagnose me before the problems lying buried deep within here cause havoc? It’s no program to download. It’s a book to open. And a willingness to be searched – searched by the living God Himself speaking in and through His Word. Here’s the diagnosis we seek.

SCRIPTURE READING: [Amos 8:1-10](#)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION:

C. S. Lewis wrote in his book, The Problem of Pain ([READ Lewis quote](#)):

What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like doing, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven as a grandfather in heaven – a senile benevolence who, as they say, ‘liked to see young people enjoying themselves’, and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, ‘a good time was had by all.’ Not many people, I admit, would formulate a theology in precisely those terms: but a conception not very different lurks at the back of their minds. I do not claim to be an exception: I should very much like to live in a universe which was governed on such lines. But since it is abundantly clear I don’t, and since I have reason to believe, nonetheless, that God is Love, I conclude that my conception of love needs correction.

Lewis was dead on right. God is not a distant senile benevolence. He is terribly interested and involved in our lives. I come back to the pivotal verse of Amos explaining to the nation of Israel why they were to undergo the trials ahead ([READ Amos 3:2](#)).

That hard assurance is reflected in this vision of a basket of summer fruit. Amos was a farmer. He would have known such fruit. Coming at the end of the season, it was ripe. Its time had come. Indeed, that’s the point of the vision – a play on words in Hebrew – “end” and “ripe” (or “summer”) fruit sounding nearly the same. Israel was ripe. Their end had come. Songs of mirth would be changed to songs of mourning. Their sense of present prosperity, future optimism, and deluded assurances were about to be crushed. The LORD had declared He could not “pass by” the sins of these people any longer. Their hearts were steadfastly wayward and unrepentant. They had excelled in their sin. Such things could not be forgiven or forgotten. Indeed, such pronouncements should have terrified them. But they didn’t. They just dug their heels in all the more.

Why the pronouncements? Why the burning in the LORD’s heart? The shape of their lives. The shape of their lives that bore a damning testimony to the objects of their worship. The LORD was surveying the landscape of their spirituality and found a barren wasteland filled with nothing but falseness and deadness. And He would not have it. Not of those who were claiming His Name upon them – then or now. Which is why this is significant for us – the eternal warning signs of heart’s betrayal and heaven’s passion.

I. COOLED RELIGION

Amos begins with what we might describe as a “cooled religion” – present but at room temperature – a formalism little more than a façade (READ Amos 8:5a).

A) Going through the Motions

These were people who were present in body but absent in devotion, faithfully attending but without any desire to do so or any evident change from having done so.

1. New Moon festival

The New Moon festival – a celebration marking the beginning of a new lunar cycle, a chance to stop from one’s labors and make sacrifices in worship.

2. Sabbath

The Sabbath – a ceasing of one’s normal labors intended for the good of all. A chance for rest, refreshment, and reflection upon the rest already secured by the LORD for His people and the rest yet to come. Both carried out with a “going through the motions.”

B) But Unmoved in Their Hearts

Motions that could be seen and observed but none in the heart – attendance to the things of God but no affections upon God Himself. Think of what these things were.

1. New Moon festival

Again, the New Moon festival – another month of God’s preserving and provision. Wonder as to the regularity of the seasons and His care in every season.

2. Sabbath

The Sabbath – a concrete and shaping expression of the reality as to who really provides for us. It comes not through the sweat of our brow but by His outstretched hands.

They should have had their attention focused and their affections aflame for the One who had loved them and given them these celebrations to remind them of the grace shown them in His saving and providing for them. But instead, there was a coolness towards both the LORD and the things of the LORD – a going through the motions.

Illustration:

“Going through the motions.” In sports, it’s laziness. In relationships, fickleness. I can recall the worst date I had in high school. A girl asked me to go to the circus with her one evening and I had agreed. But that afternoon another girl (with whom I was rather smitten) called to say she had broken up with her boyfriend and wanted to know if I could go out with her and her friends that night. Well, I said no but didn’t tell her why. I was enough of a gentleman to keep my first commitment. But I was enough of a heel to be preoccupied with my thoughts. I “went through the motions” of that date.

Application:

Now when it comes to larger issues there’s a simple truism we need to take to heart. That which preoccupies your thoughts is your god. Now I’m not saying in worship we have to “leave all our troubles at the door.” But I am asking this question. Right now, “*What are you pinning your hopes on? What are you counting on to sustain you through your troubles?*” It doesn’t matter what it is – another job, another house, another body, another spouse – that thing you’re pining for has become your god. What we worship inevitably shapes our lives. Our god preoccupies our thoughts. So here’s the question. “*Who or what preoccupies your thoughts? Who or what is your god?*”

II. COMPROMISED STANDARDS

Such questions beg to be raised in regards to a cooled religion. But Amos presses further and forces us to consider compromised standards as well. In fact, if you listen to what he says, it seems that the standards slip as the religion cools (READ Amos 8:5-6).

A) Corrupted Practices

Amos is setting before us certain corrupted practices of the times.

1. What they sold

We see it first in what was sold – the chaff of the wheat. In their desire to squeeze as much profit from the sale, the merchants were selling the husks – the worthless and rejected leftovers. And, as if that wasn't bad enough, they were selling their own countrymen as well – a thing clearly forbidden ([READ Leviticus 25:39-43](#)).

2. How they sold

Then there is the manner in which their business was being conducted – best summed up as trying by any means (including dishonest ones) to sell as little as they could for as much as possible. Again, a thing clearly forbidden ([READ Leviticus 19:35-36](#)).

B) Covetous Desires

And what drove all these corrupted practices? Their own covetous desires.

1. Blinded to what they had

They were blind – blinded to what they had already, blinded by what they had yet to have that they were convinced they needed and were due. And blind to the consequences.

2. Sacrificing what they had

Willing to sacrifice whatever they had (including their standards) to get what they didn't.

Illustration:

People will sacrifice for what they deem to be of value. That's just reality. Now sometimes such sacrifices are laudable and worth emulating ([READ crash story](#)):

On August 16, 1987, Northwest Airlines flight 225 crashed just after taking off from the Detroit airport, killing 155 people. One survived: a four-year-old from Tempe, Arizona, named Cecelia. News accounts say when rescuers found Cecelia they did not believe she had been on the plane. Investigators first assumed Cecelia had been a passenger in one of the cars on the highway onto which the airliner crashed. But when the passenger register for the flight was checked, there was Cecelia's name.

Cecelia survived because, even as the plane was falling, Cecelia's mother, Paula Chican, unbuckled her own seat belt, got down on her knees in front of her daughter, wrapped her arms and body around Cecelia, and then would not let her go.

Again, people will sacrifice for what they deem to be of value. Paula Chican's sacrifice was laudable. The value she placed on her daughter's life was right.

Application:

But, as I said with regard to a cooled religion and what preoccupies us, here too there are some hard realities we must face. That which you will sacrifice for is your god. And some of these gods can be demanding. For career's sake we may sacrifice our relationship with our spouse. For providing's sake we may sacrifice our relationship with our children. For reputation's sake we may sacrifice our honesty so as not to be exposed. That which you will sacrifice for is your god. That's reality. So the question then becomes "*For who or what are we sacrificing? And why? Who or what is our god?*"

III. CALLOUSED INDIFFERENCE

Yet Amos presses us further. Starting with a cooled religion and compromised standards, he then moves on to force us to face what could best be described as calloused indifference ([READ Amos 8:4-6](#)). This is really the fuel for the LORD's fury.

A) Trampling the Poor

Amidst people claiming His Name, there was a "trampling" of the poor.

1. Not with purposeful intent

Not with purposeful intent. The wealthy Israelites of mid-8th century B.C. were simply taking advantage of government policies that favored the rich and ignored the poor.

2. But as an obvious effect

They had not set out to crush them to the ground. But it's what they were doing – forcing some into starvation, others into slavery, illness, a lack of clothing and shelter. This was the effect of the callousness of their hearts to their fellow man, their fellow countrymen.

B) Despising their God

Despising not only them but ultimately their God as well. In a twofold way.

1. The One whose hands made them

He was the One whose hands had created them, formed them, knitted them together in their mother's womb, made them in His image and according to His likeness.

2. The One whose heart held them

And His was the One whose heart held them as well. All through the Scriptures, especially in the prophets, we see the special place reserved in the heart of God for the poor. So much so to be calloused towards them is to be calloused towards God. J. A. Motyer put it this way in his commentary on Amos ([READ quote](#)):

Nothing reveals more clearly either membership of His people or ripeness for judgment than the attitude adopted towards the helpless and the hopeless, because, of course, this reveals whether or not we resemble Him whom we claim to worship.

Illustration:

You've heard that spouses, even pet owners, come to look like the ones they adore. Well it's something like that here. But with far greater consequences.

Application:

Remember what we read earlier in Psalm 115 ([READ Psalm 115:4-8](#)). The object of our worship shapes the form of our lives. We become more and more like the things we worship. Ironically, idols – false gods of any kind – for all their power over us, have no life in and of themselves. Which means the more we worship them, the less alive, the less human, the more thin of soul we become. This is serious. *“What dead god have I put in the place of the one, true, living God? What or who are we worshipping?”*

CONCLUSION:

Now, where does this leave us? See how He loves us! God is not the senile benevolence, the grandfather in heaven, Lewis alluded to. He takes us seriously. He takes the object of our worship seriously and thus the shape of our lives seriously as well. Think of the painstaking craftsmanship of an artist and his work, of the determination of a trainer and his dog, of the devotion of a parent to their child, or of the passion of spouse to their beloved. Each of these images, building in intensity, captures something of the love God has for us – a love that will not go away, a love that will not leave us alone, a love that will not let go. A love that is so determined to love that it is willing – as we've said before – to hurt in order to heal. Bent on exposing the disease of our hearts, loosening the grip on our idols, deepening our trust in Him and Him alone.

See how He loves us! If He loved us with the kind of fickle love with which we love, what hope would we have? But He is tenacious, faithful, and good. Be encouraged – these hard words are anything but an indication of a slightness to His affections for us. Hardly – they show us how solid those affections are. Which then means we have all the more reason to examine our hearts. How could we not – given such devotion and given such safety in His presence? How could we not? Let's go to Him now in prayer.

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