

The Pursuit of Holiness

(Amos 2: 6-16)

As Amos looked out on the worship that was taking place at Bethel the prophet was grieved and heartsick. Even more so he helps us to see how weighed down God is with the way the Israelites are living. At verse 2.13 we read these words: So, I will press you down in your place, just as a cart presses down when it is full of sheaves.” As we read this verse God is saying to Israel that because of their ungodly ways God will press them down, just as the ground is pressed down when under the weight of a cart filled with bundles of wheat. However, the commentators that I read this week say that this is a very difficult verse to translate. For not only can be it interpreted as meaning this is what God will do to Israel, it can also be interpreted as describing God’s emotional response to Israel’s actions. This alternate reading is captured vividly in the translation called the Message, “You’re too much for me. I’m hard-pressed--to the breaking point. I’m like a wagon piled high and overloaded, creaking and groaning.” Here the simile doesn’t describe what God will do to Israel but rather it pictures what Israel’s actions are doing to God. Here is a verse where both interpretations help us better understand the message presented to us. Amos will show us how God is effected by Israel’s ways and what the consequences of this will be for Israel.

As Amos begins to speak for God to Israel he addresses three things here in chapter 2. In verses 6-8 he judges Israel for their prevailing sins. These include the use of the courts to benefit the rich and powerful, sexual sins, and the oppression of the poor.

⁶Thus says the LORD:

For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—

⁷they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned;

⁸they lay themselves down beside every altar

on garments taken in pledge;
and in the house of their God they drink
wine bought with fines they imposed.

Having brought into the light the Israelite's dominant sins he then goes on to call them to account for their contempt of the benefits God had conferred upon them. So we read in verses 9-11

⁹ Yet I destroyed the Amorite before them,
whose height was like the height of cedars,
and who was as strong as oaks;
I destroyed his fruit above,
and his roots beneath.

¹⁰ Also I brought you up out of the land of Egypt,
and led you forty years in the wilderness,
to possess the land of the Amorite. (This is the land of Palestine)

¹¹ And I raised up some of your children to be prophets
and some of your youths to be nazirites.¹
Is it not indeed so, O people of Israel?
says the LORD.

¹² But you made the nazirites drink wine,
and commanded the prophets,
saying, "You shall not prophesy."

Thirdly he warns the Israelites of the threatening trouble that looms large on the horizon because of their contempt of God's grace and their willful disobedience.

¹³ So, I will press you down in your place,
just as a cart presses down
when it is full of sheaves.

¹ A Nazirite was a man or woman who was consecrated for life or for a set period of time to complete a vow to God. The word "Nazarite" means "separated to God." The Nazirite devoted himself or herself to self-imposed discipline in order to perform some special service. Naziritism developed into a ritual for those who sought to consecrate themselves temporarily to God. During the period of consecration, one of the things a devotee abstained from was drinking wine. This symbolized in a concrete way that their lives were set apart for God's service.

¹⁴ Flight shall perish from the swift,
and the strong shall not retain their strength,
nor shall the mighty save their lives;
¹⁵ those who handle the bow shall not stand,
and those who are swift of foot shall not save themselves,
nor shall those who ride horses save their lives;
¹⁶ and those who are stout of heart among the mighty
shall flee away naked in that day,
says the LORD.

In the weeks to come I will refer back to some of these verses as we better understand Amos' message. What I want to do for the rest of this morning is address what was the underlying problem that not only faced Israel then, but is a problem facing the church today. I think our problem here is the fact that just like the Israelites, you and I are in danger of forgetting a very important spiritual dimension of a God directed life. This is something AMOS would say that anyone who is sincere about wanting to be devoted to God must understand...and that is the importance of pursuing HOLINESS.

Now HOLINESS is a very Scriptural idea. We read in verse seven how the Israelite's actions resulted in their profaning the name of God. The word holy in its various forms occurs more than 600 times in the Bible. Two of those times are found in [Leviticus 11:44](#) where God says, I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be HOLY, because I am HOLY. But, what exactly does God mean? What is holiness?

To be holy is to be morally blameless. Now, of course only GOD is morally blameless. Only God is Holy but in this text from Leviticus and in hundreds of others like it God calls us pursue holiness in our daily living. I think a good definition of holiness is this, *Willfully separating ourselves FROM sin and separating ourselves TO God*. Now, why do you think it is that so many Christians struggle with the pursuit of holiness? Why does the church of Jesus Christ so often seem to be more conformed to the sinful world around it than to our holy God?

a. First of all, our attitude toward sin is more SELF-centered than GOD-centered.

So often you and I are more concerned about our own victory over sin than we are about the fact that our sins grieve the heart of God. We never see sin aright until we see it against God. All sin is against God in this sense. That is, His law is broken. His authority is despised. His government is set at naught. We must learn to say as the returning prodigal said, ‘I have sinned AGAINST HEAVEN and as David said, ‘Against Thee, Thee Oh God only have I sinned.’ God wants us to walk in obedience to Him in life. In fact, this must be our primary motivation in choosing NOT to sin—obedience and not personal victory. You see, victory is a by-product of obedience, not an end in itself. And it is important for us to get this in the right order because obedience is oriented toward God, whereas victory is oriented toward self. It is impossible to be holy without God’s power. PLUS to attempt to do so defies the definition of Holiness. Remember? I said that holiness not only means being set apart from the world. It also means being set apart TO God. Pursuing holiness is based on our love for God, not on our prideful ability to be good. As we better understand that holiness is based on our love for God we more clearly understand that we have a personal RESPONSIBILITY to walk in holiness. We are called to use the freedom of choice that God has given us and decide to obey Him and live holy lives.

By the way if we don’t train for holiness then we are training for worldliness. If we don’t seek to be like God...the world will pull us the other way—pursuing holiness involves pulling AGAINST the sinful influences around us. It’s like pulling against a huge rubber band. If you stop pulling in one direction you will be pulled back in the other.

The fact of the matter is that holiness doesn’t just happen. You have to be intentional in pursuing it. Remember the words of Paul to the Philippians? He said, Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do...I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. [I press on in my pursuit of holiness!] All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. (Philippians 3:13, 15)

c. Our third problem with holy living is that we do not take some sin seriously.

We have mentally categorized sin into that which is unacceptable and that which may be tolerated. We think that it is okay to commit little sins. And the danger with this way of thinking is that it is the little sins that always lead to the bigger sins. We must be willing to call sin SIN not because it is big or little but because God's law forbids it. Now I want to return to the basic definition of holiness I gave you a moment ago. Remember? I said holiness is separating ourselves FROM sin and separating ourselves TO God.

I want to return to that because I want to point out a very practical way that we can pursue basic holiness...

1. It involves the practice of SOLITUDE.

AMOS—and anyone whom God has used in furthering His kingdom—will tell you that it is essential to pull away from the world on a regular basis...each and every day, so that we can experience solitude...uninterrupted time away from the world and uninterrupted time alone with God. Remember—Amos was a farmer, a man of the land who spent most of his time alone—secluded from the perverse culture around him. And this lifestyle made it possible for him to pray undistracted, and in this way deepen his relationship with God. It also gave him a godly perspective on the sinful world around him...he was able to see sin as sin.

I'm not saying that we need to join monasteries or religious communes. I'm just saying that to avoid the negative influence of our world we need regular time alone with God, time apart from the influence of the world. The New Testament records that Jesus engaged in this kind of solitude frequently. At the beginning of His ministry, our Lord went to this same Tekoan wilderness where Amos lived for an extended period of fasting and prayer. He also went into solitude when He heard about the death of John the Baptist and when He was about to choose His disciples and several other times. This pattern continued into the final days of His life, when again He withdrew into the solitude of the Garden of Gethsemane to pray on the night of His arrest which means that Jesus ENDED His ministry, as He BEGAN it, with the practice of solitude. And Jesus taught His disciples to follow His example. In Mark 6.31 urged them saying, Come away with Me by yourselves to a quiet place. and He issues the same invitation to us today.

Now, what is it that makes solitude so important?

Solitude is the one place where we can gain freedom from the forces of society that will otherwise relentlessly mold us. We live in a lethal environment. Like the culture of Amos' day, ours is filled with ideas and values and pressures and temptations about success and security and comfort and happiness that we will not even notice, unless we withdraw on occasion to clear our heads in the presence of our Holy God

The English preacher and writer P. T. Forsythe put it this way. He said that solitude is important because, Unless there is within us a yearning for that which is ABOVE us, we shall soon yield to that which is ABOUT us. And, when we clear our heads through the regular habit of practicing times of solitude with God we come to see something...that people immersed in our materialistic world often miss.

2 - ...We realize that the world's pleasures are TEMPORARY at best.

Amos' book records that the people of Israel foolishly invested their lives in the things of THIS world, elaborate homes, expensive furniture, fat bank accounts. But this is a dead end road to take...because as [Isaiah 40:6-8](#) says, All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass...but the word of our God stands forever.

As this text says, the best rewards this world has to offer have the substance and staying power of cut flowers. They droop, wither, and eventually perish under God's judgement. Jesus calls his disciples to live for the things of eternal significance, things of TRUE value.

God calls us to be holy because he is holy. Amos will show us what happens to a religious community that neglects this call. As we keep this call before us in our study of this 8th century prophet we will better understand his message and be motivated to call upon the Holy Spirit to help us separate ourselves FROM sin so that we can be separate TO God.