

True Worship

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Date: 12 November 2023

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[0 : 0 0] You know, these words are known all across the world. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

That sort of became known worldwide, obviously because of the great civil rights leader Martin Luther King, a man who gave his life to seeing this fulfilled in the world, in our society.

And although many people around the world know these words, a lot of people think they actually came from Martin Luther King when in fact he was quoting one of the Old Testament prophets, a prophet by the name of Amos.

And Amos was a shepherd and he was a fig farmer. And he lived right on the border between the northern and southern kingdoms.

Israel at this time in history was divided. And God called Amos, this shepherd and farmer, to go into the northern kingdom as a prophet, to call God's people back to him and to call them to the ministry of justice and righteousness.

[1 : 1 6] And so this morning we're going to be looking at Amos chapter 5, where this famous verse comes from, and we're going to see why justice matters so much to people like Martin Luther King Jr., why he was willing to lay down his life in the pursuit of it.

And what we will see is this, is that justice matters to God. God is a God of justice. So we can't understand God apart from justice, and we can't understand justice apart from God.

The passage breaks down into three parts. We will see first an urgent question. Then we will see a dire problem. And then finally we'll see an unexpected hope.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and as we open it, may we not simply rely on the wisdom or insight of human beings, but Lord, we're here because we desire and we need for you to speak to us.

You have spoken to your people all throughout history. You continue to speak to your people through your word. And we pray that we would not only hear your word, but have soft hearts that are able to receive your word, that you would do your work in us, Lord, for your glory.

[2 : 3 6] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So first of all, an urgent question. If you have a Bible, we're in Amos chapter 5. First of all, looking at verses 18 through 20.

All of the lectionary readings this week talk about something or point to something called in the Bible, the day of the Lord, the day of the Lord.

This is a phrase that shows up in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. There's a promise that runs through Scripture that one day at the end of history, at the culmination of everything, God is going to come.

And it's going to be a time of both judgment and salvation. And this promise is that one day God is going to come and make everything right in the world.

So all wars will cease. All suffering and injustice and oppression will cease. And everything sad, as Tolkien writes, everything sad will come untrue.

[3 : 3 6] Every tear will be wiped away. And so at this point in Israel's history, they looked forward to the day of the Lord because they...and they had great anticipation because they assumed it would be the day of their vindication.

God would side with Israel against her enemies. God would bring judgment and condemnation to the other nations. And Israel would be raised up to her rightful place as God's chosen people, given dominion over all.

And so they looked forward to the day of the Lord. So imagine their whiplash. Upon hearing the words of the prophet Amos in verse 18, he says, Woe to you.

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord. In other words, why are you looking forward to it? For you, it's not going to be a day of light.

It's going to be a day of inescapable darkness. And he uses this grim parable to illustrate it. He says, it's as if you're walking along assuming that everything is fine on a normal sunny afternoon and a lion jumps out of the bushes.

[4 : 53] And then you run away from the lion and just as you escape the lion, a bear jumps out of the bushes. And then you run from the bear and you find a house and you scramble inside and you slam the door shut.

And just as you're leaning your hand against the doorpost trying to catch your breath, a snake strikes your hand. And all goes dark. Why are you looking forward to that?

Jesus also used parables to describe the coming of the day of the Lord. Our gospel reading is one such example. He tells a parable of ten bridesmaids who are waiting for the bridegroom to come to the home of the bride so that they can all process to the wedding feast.

Five are prepared with extra lamp oil in case it takes longer than they think. Five are unprepared. They only bring enough oil for the lamp that they have burning.

So, the end of the parable, we have the five who are prepared for the coming of the bridegroom.

They are able to go into the wedding feast. But the five who were unprepared end up shut out in the cold.

[5 : 59] And both of these parables convey the same idea that for those who are unprepared, the day of the Lord is going to be the day of God's judgment. It's going to be a day of darkness.

It's going to be a day of being shut out, away from God's presence. Now, most people in the late modern West absolutely abhor the idea of God's judgment.

It's very outdated. You don't hear it talked about as much. It's very offensive to our modern ears. A lot of people you talk to say, well, I would never believe in a God like that.

And most Westerners that you talk to prefer the idea, if they believe in God, they prefer the idea of a God not of judgment, but a God essentially of tolerance, a God who says, because I love you, I let you do as you please.

It's not offensive. It preaches well. It's a very attractive idea. A God of tolerance essentially.

[7 : 13] So let me say this. If you're somebody who you hear this and that describes you, you're like, I don't really like the idea of a God of judgment, but I do like the idea of a God of tolerance.

That's the kind of God I want to believe in.

I want to ask you this. Why do you think that is? Or another way to put it is, why are you offended by a God of judgment, and yet you're not offended by a God of tolerance?

Why do you think one is attractive and one is offensive? You know, I recently heard the story of a man named Emma, and he was in the Democratic Republic of the Congo after the president was forced out in 1997, and the country, as some of you may know, just collapsed into conflict and chaos.

And so Emma witnessed unspeakable atrocities committed against his friends, committed against his family. They barely escaped as refugees with absolutely nothing, walking on foot to Uganda.

And do you know what he said as he told his story and as he began to break down and to weep? He said this, I could never believe the gospel if it were not for the judgment of God.

[8 : 30] I could never believe the gospel if it were not for the judgment of God. And here's the reason. He says, because I will never get justice in this world. And the only way I can cope with all of this is knowing that one day there will be justice.

If God's not the kind of God who will bring justice and punish the evildoers and right the wrongs that were committed against Emma and his friends and family, that are committed against so many people around the world, if God is not that kind of God, he's saying, I wouldn't believe in him.

Or at least he would not be worth my worship. Right? So I think we in the West, particularly in the affluent West, get offended by a God of justice, but a man like Emma would be just as offended by a God of tolerance.

And the reason, with all due respect, is because I don't think many of us have ever really, truly experienced injustice committed against us. But for the many people around the world, for the majority of people around the world and across history, who have experienced significant injustice against them personally, the promise of God's judgment is good news.

And the idea of a God who would simply overlook all of that does not sound like a loving God. It sounds like a despicable God. Right? So God's judgment flows out of his love.

[10:01] It's because he loves this world and everything in it that he cannot overlook evil and injustice. Right? But this raises a very urgent question.

And here's the urgent question. Are we prepared? Are we prepared? Right? The day of the Lord is coming.

It could be 5,000 years from now. It could be five minutes from now. Jesus is very clear. No one will know the day or the hour. It will come without warning.

And when it comes, we will all stand before God and we will be judged. And so the question that Amos is raising here first is, are we prepared to stand before God on that day?

The people of Israel thought they were. They assumed they were. But Amos is warning them that they are in fact not. He's saying, wake up.

[11:06] Now we need to ask the question, why not? Why are they not prepared? A dire problem. Verses 21 to 23. Here God says, I hate.

I despise your feasts. He says he will not accept their offerings. And he says that their music is just noise. Now does this mean that God doesn't like our worship?

God doesn't like our singing? It's more complicated than that. What's the problem going on here? See, this would have been confusing to the Israelites because at this time in history, if you asked most people in Israel, they're doing quite well.

The ruler was a man named Jeroboam II. And by human standards, he probably looked like a pretty successful king. He was a very successful military leader.

He won lots of battles. He amassed a great deal of land and wealth. And so people saw him as a very successful leader. But social injustice was rampant throughout the land.

[12:11] Social injustice was rampant. And the book of Amos is full of examples of this injustice. There was a major wealth gap. And the rich were selling the poor into debt slavery and then giving them no way out.

That's something that still happens today. Right? The courts were corrupt. They were full of bribery and preferential treatment. He says in chapter 6, you know, that there was excessive taxation trying to milk the poor, trying to sort of drain them for every drop they could extract out of them.

And it says in chapter 6 that when the rich could no longer extract anything out of the poor, they simply ignored them and left them to rot. So this is why God hates their worship.

Because it is totally disconnected from how they treat people. You know, they're coming to worship and they're singing and they're praying and they're preaching and they're saying, you know, we love you, God.

We love you, God. We love you, God. And God is saying, you keep using that word. But I do not think it means what you think it means. You keep saying, I love you.

[13:22] But I don't think that that means what you think it means. True worship is this, God says. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

And here these words are extremely important. Righteousness means being in right relationship. You're in right relationship with those around you. You're treating people with fairness and equity regardless of your social differences.

You're ensuring that the people around you have what they need to flourish. That's righteousness. Justice refers to actively correcting situations where that is not happening.

All right, so another way of thinking about it is this. If righteousness was being practiced, there would be no need for justice. Justice is meant to correct wherever righteousness is not status quo. Here's how Job describes righteousness and justice. He says, I rescued the poor who cried for help and the fatherless who had none to assist them. The one who was dying blessed me.

[14:32] I made the widow's heart sing. I put on righteousness as my clothing, justice as my robe and my turban. I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame.

I was a father to the needy. I took up the case of the stranger. I broke the fangs of the wicked and snatched the victims from their teeth. That's what it looks like to do the work of justice and righteousness.

And these qualities were to be the distinguishing mark of God's people. God's vision for His people is that in a world full of people with no concept of human rights whatsoever.

At this point in history, there was no foundation for universal human rights. In a world full of people where it was normative to enslave people, every nation had slaves, where it was normative for the strong to trample the weak, God's vision is that His people would flow like a river of righteousness and justice.

Everywhere they go, the injustice and corruption is washed away. I read the story. If you're from Chicago, you probably know the story. But I read the story of Chicago at the turn of the 20th century and how the water around Chicago, the Chicago River, was this shallow, bubbling cesspool.

[15:57] And it was so polluted that thousands of people were dying every year. And when the fires came through, the water was flammable. It was that polluted. And that's how the fire spread so quickly.

It literally caught the surface of the water on fire. And the only thing that they could do, the only way they knew how to clean it up, was to accomplish one of the great engineering marvels of the millennium, which is through a series of canals and locks and gates, they actually were able to reverse the flow of the Chicago River.

And so in January of, I think it was maybe right around 1900, they open a sluice gate and all of the water from the Great Lakes flows into the Chicago River.

And it was this massive rush of fresh water that just washed all that pollution away. And there are people who say that Chicago wouldn't even be around today if it hadn't been for that.

And so this is, that's a, it's an imperfect analogy. You know, I hear that and I think, well, where did all that pollution go, right? So it's not, it went somewhere, right? So it's not a perfect analogy, but as a visual image, this is what God's vision is for His people.

[17:05] I want you to be like a river of fresh water of justice and righteousness washing into this cesspool of injustice. And wherever God's people go, there is righteousness and justice. It is their fingerprints on the world, right?

That's God's vision. The fact that this is not the case, what that means is that there is something deeply wrong in their relationship with God, and they need to repent.

That's what Amos is saying, right? And that's the thing that we need to pay attention to here. One of the clearest indicators that we are in right relationship with God is that we care about justice and righteousness for those around us.

We worship in a metro area where the high rising cost of housing and childcare is driving many people out of the city, and many of those are black and brown people who have been, you know, some of whom their families have been here for generations.

It's disproportionately affecting them. We live in a city where at least 5,000 people in the metro area, and that's the ones that are accounted for, are experiencing homelessness as we're heading into another winter.

[18:16] You know, we live in an area where more than a third of residents, just in the D.C. area, more than a third of residents experience food insecurity, right? There's 1,500 kids currently in the foster care system and another 1,500 that are deemed high risk, meaning they're very soon likely to be in the foster care system.

Violent crime is up this year over last year, something like 38%, right? We live in a city where these are realities that people are facing. And what Amos is essentially saying is this.

If we're going to the church, going to church in that metro D.C. area, and we're worshiping and we're praying and we're preaching and we're singing, and yet we're doing all of that without caring about issues like these, then this is saying our worship is empty.

It's empty. Now, we have great music, but our worship is noise in God's ears if that's the case.

That's what Amos is saying. And what's so tragic is that these issues have become politicized such that we say, well, certain kinds of Christians or certain kinds of churches or certain kinds of people care about social justice.

[19:26] What I want us to understand is that Amos shows us this is pre-political. This is upstream from politics. We can disagree and debate about the best strategies and policies, but justice and righteousness are central to our calling because they are central to God's character.

So, to summarize where we are, God cares deeply about justice. And one day there's this promise that God is going to come and bring ultimate justice to the world, right?

What we do is like the Chicago River, right? We can lessen it, but one day God is going to come and He's going to eradicate it. It's going to no longer exist.

And so, that question that we ask first, are we ready for that day? Are we prepared for that day? For those of us who are like Israel, who assume that we are, we should do a bit of a gut check. Where's the evidence for that? Where's the evidence for that? Right? Evidence that we are right with God is that we care about the things that God cares about.

[20 : 34] Do we care about the things that God cares about, like justice and righteousness? So, here's where we are as we move into this final point. How do we get right with God so that we are prepared?

And then how do we get the kind of hearts that care about the things that God cares about? And this is where we lead into an unexpected hope. The answer, my friends, is not to simply go out and do more justice.

Caring about justice is not controversial in D.C. I don't know anybody who doesn't care about justice in one way or another. But why? Why do we care?

What's the source of that motivation? And how do we define justice? What does that actually mean? The prophet Amos knows that the core problem, the reason why injustice runs rampant is not social, it's not political, it's not cultural.

He understands that the core problem is spiritual. This is one of the greatest contributions from Amos to our ongoing conversation and understanding about justice.

[21 : 42] The core reason why there is injustice is idolatry. It's idolatry. Jeroboam II allowed people, as successful as he was in the eyes of the world, he allowed people to worship the false gods, the idols of the Canaanites.

And at that time, they were primarily the gods of sex, weather, or, you know, control, crops, right? And then power. And Amos knew that as a prophet, he understood that idolatry is what leads to injustice.

And that makes sense, right? If people worship power and status and conquest, it only makes sense that they would then trample the weak and the poor, right?

If you live in a society that literally worships a god of power and conquest, how do you make sense of the people who are poor and weak? Well, they're clearly cursed.

They're clearly not blessed. They're clearly got on the wrong side of our god somehow, and so we can do whatever we want to them, right? It makes sense how that would be the case.

[22 : 50] And, you know, it's the same today as we look at our society. We don't have time to do too many examples, but, you know, our society is enthralled by idols such as status and individualism.

Right? With regard to status and wealth, I mean, the American dream has become a kind of brutal meritocracy where the wealthiest families are getting wealthier and many others are falling further behind.

People have come to worship success and status. People are going into massive debt to try to get a college education. Children really, in many cases as they grow up, are not even experiencing a childhood because their entire focus, the entire focus from their high-status parents is to get into Ivy League schools and to be set, right, to join the upper echelons of society.

And so there's massive anxiety, rising rates of suicide, massive amounts of debt, all related to the pursuit of this dream. Right? And when it comes to individualism, people have come to worship individual self-expression so much that the fabric of society has broken down.

We're becoming increasingly subdivided into special interest groups. So if the root problem behind injustice is spiritual, which is what Amos is saying, what that means is that we need a spiritual solution, a spiritual solution.

[24 : 24] All throughout Amos 5, God calls out to His people, and you know what He says? He doesn't say, just go and do more justice. He says, seek me and live.

Seek me. Seek the Lord. That's the key. And we need to understand what it means. In context, God is saying this. He says, this isn't going to be solved by just going to church more.

This isn't going to be solved by signing up to volunteer at a soup kitchen. There's more going on here. He's saying, you need to know me. You need to be in relationship with me.

Our hearts need to be intertwined, and then you will be the kind of person who can go out and do this work in the world. But what that means is that before you do that, you need to leave the idols behind.

You need to leave behind the things that you're truly worshiping and come to me. You need a new heart, and you're going to find that if you come to me.

[25 : 29] And coming to the Lord like this means you come with an attitude of dependence. You come with humble submission. You cry out to God for mercy. And here's where this is pointing us.

The greatest injustice ever committed, the greatest injustice ever committed, is whenever human beings reject and ignore God in the world that He made.

That is the greatest injustice in history. And what God is saying is you have to correct that injustice before you can be a part of correcting the rest of the injustice in the world.

That has to be made right. And I'll be frank with you. There's very little hope of that happening in the book of Amos. So praise the Lord that we have a larger body of Scripture and we understand more of the story.

Because even though it seems to be very little hope in Amos, there are hints that God has a plan. At the very end of chapter 9, there is this promise. There's doom and gloom and judgment and hopelessness.

[26 : 44] And then right when you get to the end, there's this place in chapter 9 where there's this promise that someone from the line of David is coming. And God is going to restore Israel.

But this time, God's going to restore Israel, and this time it's going to include people from all of the nations. It's no longer going to be an ethnic group. There's going to be people from all of the nations, and they're all part of this restored people.

But then we're left to wonder, who is this person who's coming? And when is this going to happen? And what is it going to mean? And then one day, centuries after this was written, a man named Jesus stood up amidst the crowds, and he said this, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.

And we need to understand what Jesus is saying here.

God's desire for a river of justice and righteousness that flows out to heal the world, Jesus is saying, I am the source of that river. I'm the source of that river.

[27 : 59] I am the river that washes away sin. I am the river that heals the world. If you want to be a part of that work, come to me. Seek me and live.

And what we see in the ministry of Jesus Christ is that he came to bring God's justice. He came to bring God's justice. But in order to be able to do that, he first had to endure God's judgment.

There's this question when we contemplate the day of the Lord. Are we prepared? And what Scripture says is that on our own, if we stand before God based on our own life, we are unprepared. No one will stand. The gospel says that Jesus Christ came to experience and endure that judgment on our behalf.

And we see in Amos chapter 8 verse 9, as Amos is in the midst of describing God's judgment, he says this, I will make the sun go down at noon and darken the earth in broad daylight.

[29 : 16] And of course, as Jesus hung there on the cross at midday, that Scripture was fulfilled. The sky was darkened as God's judgment fell on him instead of us.

But what that means, because of that, Jesus alone can prepare us to stand before God on the day of the Lord. His grace and mercy cover our sins, so we have nothing to fear.

The Israelites were guilty of the sin of presumption. But we have something different. We have assurance. Assurance because it's not based on what we do, it's based on what he has already done.

It has been accomplished. And then what happens is that when we realize that, when we begin to see that God's response response to the injustice that we committed against Him is to give His life for us, that begins to change our hearts.

I perpetrated the greatest injustice possible against the Lord, and He laid down His life to set me free from that debt. And that begins to melt and soften and change your heart.

[30 : 32] It begins to fill you and compel you and move you to want to see other relationships put right. And Jesus becomes, the gospel becomes the source of that river that flows out of us and into the world.

If you try to do justice apart from Jesus Christ, you're either going to become burned out because you're trying to be a river with no source, or you're going to become self-righteous because you think that you're the source.

It is only by continually coming back to Jesus Christ and remembering that once we were the perpetrators of great injustice, and only through His grace, are we able to become workers of justice and righteousness in the world.

It compels us to want to give our lives to heal the world as Jesus has given His life to heal us. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You that the story did not end with Amos, and we thank You that the story does not end with us.

We thank You that we are a part now of this river, and that You, in the midst of all of the war and the darkness and the chaos, that You are at work bringing renewal.

[31 : 54] And we thank You that we know how the story ends, that we will one day see the world as You intend it to be, a world put right.

Lord, we long for that day, and it is in light of that justice that we commit ourselves to doing the work of justice here in this city, Lord. We pray this would be done by Your grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.