

Amos' lament

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[0 : 00] Amen. And we believe it is God's word because we do, don't we?

The whole Bible is God's word. So this is what we're doing this morning is Amos 5, but it's not because I know something special about you that I've brought it today.

But let justice roll on like a river. Righteousness like a never failing stream. I wonder whether you've heard those words before, whether they are recognizable to you.

Martin Luther King used these words to great effect in his speeches at civil rights marches in America. And he wasn't just saying these words, those specific words.

He was calling on the context, the whole of Amos 5, the whole of Amos as he was saying them. He was attempting to show America that outward religious motions don't make wicked acts acceptable.

[1 : 32] Does that make sense? So he was speaking to religious America and he was saying, your religious motions are not acceptable because they don't line up with your actions.

You can't say one thing and do something that contradicts it, that shows it to be wrong. And as we look at Amos 5, we must see that God hates false religion.

God hates false religion. Just have a look back at verse 21 again. 21 to 24. Just see that again. This is God speaking.

I hate, I despise your religious festivals. Your assemblies are a stench to me. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the music of your harps.

[2 : 43] But let justice roll on like a river. Righteousness like a never failing stream. God hates false religion.

I wonder whether you've ever thought about how God ranks people. I think it's tempting to think this is how God ranks people. People who love God and live out his ways, top delighted with them.

Then next, people who act religiously but are ungodly. Then people who aren't religious but live well. And finally, those people who aren't religious and are ungodly.

Well, sometimes I think we can think in those ways. Frequently, worryingly often in recent years, we have seen people unwilling to bring justice because they want to protect ministries.

Are you aware of this? So, in Christian ministries, there have been people going, we can't speak out on this. We can't bring this into the light because we don't want to, we want to protect the ministry.

[3 : 46] People hiding clearly ungodly behaviour because so and so is doing a great work for the Lord and we don't want to hinder it. That seems to be exactly the kind of attitude that God hates in Amos.

Now, I've had a good look. I can't find anywhere in the New Testament where God rebukes the church for her lack of evangelistic zeal. I encourage you to tell me afterwards if you can think of a place where God rebukes the church for her lack of evangelistic zeal.

But I can find plenty of examples of the church being rebuked for ungodliness. God is really concerned with godliness. God is a key fruit of faith, far more important than we might sometimes suggest.

And a danger in the church is that we're so cautious of moralism that we neglect godliness. Let me just explain that. So, moralism, the idea that we might somehow be good enough to get God's approval.

We're so worried about people thinking that, that we can steer away from thinking godliness is really important. Jesus saved us by his finished work on the cross.

[5 : 09] It is by grace that we are saved, not through works, so that no one may boast. That's what Ephesians 2 says. That's true.

We mustn't pretend that doing good will save us. It won't. But if we keep going in Ephesians 2, we would see that we are God's handiwork, created to do the good works God has planned for us to do.

So God hates false religion. And God hates false Christianity. God hates false Christianity.

The expectation throughout the Bible is that godliness is the fruit of true faith. Israel in Amos's day is revealed to be thoroughly wicked.

Listen to the accusations interweaved through Amos 5. So verse 7. There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.

[6 : 13] There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells truth. Verse 10. Verse 12. There are those who oppress the innocent and take brides and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.

No wonder Martin Luther King came here when he was challenging racism in America. The Christian who is a pillar of the local church, but then who treats people who look differently as subhuman, unrepentantly, will face God's anger.

Sin in the week.

Sin in the week. Sing heartily on Sunday. Sin in the week. And then be first to open our Bible as it's being read. Sin in the week. And then bless our brother or sister on a Sunday.

It's a dangerous pattern. There is no room for separating our spiritual lives off from the rest of our life. God cares just as much about what we do in the workplace as in church.

[7 : 46] And true spiritual life is seen in all of life. And so friends, we need to assess our ways. Religiosity, being religious, doesn't give us a get out clause for godly fruit.

Amos 5 is a lament. It's a lament because the Israelites have been ungodly for years, for decades. It should be said, not all of them.

Not all of them. But many of them were playing at loving God. And not really loving him. And the clear command of Amos 5.

Is seek the Lord and live. Seek the Lord and live. It's there in verse 4. This is what the Lord says to Israel.

Seek me and live. And it's there in verse 6. Seek the Lord and live. So it doesn't say seek religion and live.

[8 : 55] God says actually the opposite. Don't go to the shrines, he says. Don't go to Bethel or Gilgal or Beersheba. Strip away pretense.

Go to the real deal. Seek the Lord and live. Loving church is great. And it's wonderful.

I do see a loving church family. That's a really good thing. We're to love church. To love one another. But it's a fruit, hopefully, of loving the Lord.

So we love the Lord first. We are to seek the Lord first. And then, hopefully, love the church. It should come as a fruit. As here, where the Lord says, seek me and live.

It's a call to repentance. It's a call to confess our sins. To plead with our God for his mercy. If you've ever longed for a revival.

[10 : 00] If you've ever longed for true revival. Then know it starts with true repentance. Things can look great on the outside.

It can be exciting and showy. But true revival. Starts with true repentance. With truly seeking the Lord. And as we do that.

As we truly seek the Lord. We'll find we are truly seeking good. For God is pure good. All his ways are good and right. And we see it in verse 14.

So verse 4. Seek me and live. Verse 6. Seek the Lord and live. Verse 14. Seek good, not evil.

That you may live. Then the Lord God Almighty will be with you. Just as you say he is. Hate evil. Love good. Maintain justice in the courts.

[10 : 56] Perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy. On the remnant of Joseph. You see to seek the Lord rightly is to seek good. That's the point of the switch there.

To seek the Lord is to seek good. Seek the Lord. Seek good, not evil. And live.

Bethel was the location where Jacob had a dream of a stairway to heaven. I wonder whether you're aware of that. So Jacob, one of the great patriarchs, one of the great fathers of Israel.

He went out from his home and he fell asleep with his head on a rock. And in it he dreamed of a stairway to heaven and angels going up and down it.

And at the end of the promises that the Lord gave him during that dream where he promised Jacob that he would bless him and give him many descendants.

[11:56] God promised Jacob that he would be with Jacob. In verse 5 we had God saying, don't go to Bethel.

Don't go to the place where Jacob went to have God with you. That's not the priority. Verse 14 we have the answer. Don't go to Bethel.

No, seek God. Seek good. That you might live. And then. And then the Lord God Almighty will be with you just as you say he is.

You see, they thought they had God with him because they were going through the supposedly right motions. They were going to the right places at the right times, doing the right things. So it seemed to them.

They thought God was with him, with them. But he wasn't. They needed to seek God. They needed to seek good. Because James tells us, faith without works is dead.

[13:02] So who is it that God delights in? It is the one who seeks him. And so seeks good. The fruit of truly turning to God is godliness.

He is good in all his ways. We're to be holy as he is holy. So if we're pursuing him, if we're seeking the Lord, we will be growing in holiness.

And a person cannot grow in holiness without seeking the Lord. It's worth saying this doesn't mean perfection.

Friends, we won't be perfect before paradise. There is no way to be perfect this side of the return of Christ and being made anew.

We still battle the flesh, the world and the devil. But there is. There is a godliness that a Christian can attain and should attain. A fruit that should come from faith.

[14:04] We should be sensitive to the spirit. We should be sensitive to the spirit. We should be sensitive to the spirit. Prompting us away from lies. Away from cruelty and oppression. We should be loving God.

And so increasingly loving his ways and putting them into practice. We should be caring for others. And building one another up. One another's up. And from what I'm aware of, from speaking to Daniel and from seeing you guys a bit in action, I think this is what you guys are seeing in this church.

Praise the Lord for that. Keep going. Keep working at that fruit. Keep bearing that fruit. Can a person be saved on the final day without bearing godly fruit?

It's a big question, isn't it? Can a person be saved on the final day without bearing godly fruit? I think the answer has to be sort of.

Sort of. You see, our salvation is not found in our godly fruit. We don't earn our salvation. But it is evidence of our salvation.

[15:16] And so the thief on the cross. I wonder whether you remember the thief on the cross. When Jesus is crucified, there's two criminals either side of him. And one criminal on one side mocks Jesus.

And the other criminal on the other side defends him. When he says, we're getting what we deserve. So he acknowledges he utterly deserves execution on a cross.

And so he has little chance for godly fruit, does he? That thief on the cross next to Jesus. And so did he have fruit in order to be saved? Well, not really.

However, it's worth saying that even in that moment, even in that little bit, what does he do? Well, he defends the Lord Jesus. Even there, there is some fruit of something of seeking the Lord.

That to seek the Lord is to defend the Lord. To guard his ways. To love him. And so hate that which is against him. And so his good deeds didn't save him.

[16:24] But there was fruit even in that little moment. So can a person be saved on the final day without bearing godly fruit? Well, sort of. Sort of.

Yes, if it was a literal just that moment. But otherwise, there's bound to be some kind of fruit being saved. Because the spirit is at work.

There must be true life. Good deeds don't save. But an unrepentantly ungodly life is evidence of being unsaved.

And I guess on that note, I want to say a particular word to you. If you're here and you're fearful. Perhaps this sermon, perhaps Amos 5, is shocking and has rocked your faith.

Perhaps as you look at your life, you see lots of ungodliness. And are fearful for your salvation. Well, friends, if that's you, then what counts is today?

[17 : 28] And today is the day for repentance. Today is the day to repent of your sin. And today is the day to turn back to Christ.

We can have confidence that Christ has paid the full price for our sin. We can have confidence of paradise being our destination. We can have confidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in us if we're in the battle today.

Today, are you turning from your sin and turning to Christ? Because it's an everyday battle. It's not that you do it once and then never need to do it again. No, it's a daily thing.

And so, friend, if you're here and you're feeling fearful, there is ungodliness in your life and you're conscious of it, just as there is in mine. Well, today is the day to repent of it. Turn from it.

Turn to Christ. Seek the Lord and live. If so, if you're battling your sin, if you're turning from it and turning to Christ, well, then be encouraged.

[18 : 31] Be encouraged. The Lord is at work. He can give you great comfort. He said to the thief on the cross, today you'll be with me in paradise. There is great confidence and hope we can have.

But, but friends, if you're conscious of ungodliness in your life and you're not repentant, if you're holding on to it, enjoying it, not battling it, if you're not seeking the Lord, well, then I'm afraid to tell you that being here earns you no salvation brownie points.

It won't help you in eternity. What counts is humbly seeking the Lord. Listen again to verses 18 to 20.

I think these are shudderingly terrifying words. 18 to 20. Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord.

Why do you long for the day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light. It will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear.

[19 : 55] As though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him. Will not the day of the Lord be darkness, not light? Pitch dark without a ray of brightness.

As a pastor, as a shepherd in the church, my greatest fear, and I've said this to our guys, is that actually we'd be thinking we're Christians, but aren't actually.

And that's the state of Israel in Amos. They think they're right with the Lord and they're not. They were looking forward to the day of the Lord.

But rather than light, they were destined for darkness. Pitch dark without a ray of brightness. There will be a day of judgment.

A day of the Lord. And for those who are unrepentant. It is darkness. It is darkness. It's like meeting a bear, being bitten by a snake.

[21 : 00] It's real. It's often described as hell. I think it's quite a good word because it sounds awful. And hell will be terrible.

It's a fearful reality. And there will be those who think they are Christians who will face that reality. God hates false Christianity.

He hated it in America with the abhorrent racism. He hates it in Hirstpill Point. And he hates it in Brighton. The urging is, seek the Lord and live.

Seek the Lord and live. I'm going to give you just a moment of quiet, a chance to pray, respond. And then in a little bit, I'll explain.

We're going to pray a prayer of confession together in a little bit. But just a chance to respond on your own. Let's pray a prayer of confession together in a little bit.

[22 : 17] Let's pray a prayer of confession together in a little bit. Thank you.

Thank you.

The act of confessing doesn't cleanse us. It is not that if we say these words of confession, we are cleansed. It is the Lord Jesus who does the work.

And the blessing for Christians is that, actually, if you're anything like me, sometimes it's hard to know I'm forgiven. Hard to know that God has taken it. And the act of confessing I find really helpful because, actually, I bring the things I'm conscious of to the Lord.

And then I know. I know that the Lord has dealt with it. So, if this is true for you, then do join in.

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have wandered and strayed from your ways like lost sheep.

[24 : 05] We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things that we ought to have done.

And we have done those things that we ought not to have done. And there is no health in us. But you, O Lord, have mercy upon us sinners.

Spare those who confess their faults. Restore those who are penitent according to your promises declared to mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake, that we may live a disciplined, righteous, and godly life. To the glory of your holy name.

Amen. Amen. And hear these words from Romans 5.

[25 : 05] You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Paul is writing about us being enslaved to sin.

When we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person. Though for a good person, someone might possibly dare to die.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. So friend, today, if you are turning to the Lord, if you are seeking the Lord, you will live.

You will know that the Lord is with you. Because God loves you. And he demonstrates it. He demonstrated it by sending Jesus to die for you while you were still a sinner.

Let me pray. Oh Lord, we know this is your word.

[26 : 12] And we are grateful for it. Because it speaks of reality. It speaks truth. But we find it hard. And we recognise we are sinners before you.

And we delight that you are a God who loves sinners. Who loves sinners so much you sent the Lord Jesus for us.

And so we gladly seek you. We seek your face. We seek you. We seek your holiness. We seek your ways. We seek good.

Help us in this. Help us to seek you rightly. Help us to live out your ways. Fill us with your spirit, we pray.

May your spirit work in us, helping us to bear fruit. And we do look forward to that day when Jesus will come and purify us.

[27 : 14] When we will not have to battle sin any longer. Where the wickedness of this world will not tempt us and draw us away from you. And so we do cry, come Lord Jesus.

Come and make everything perfect. Amen. Am I introducing?

It's a glorious hymn to finish. Rock of ages, cleft for me. Hide me now, my refuge be. Do stand when the music starts.

Do stand when the music starts.