

“Treasure in Heaven”

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15 • Psalm 90:12-17 • Hebrews 4:12-16 • Mark 10:17-31

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason, Michigan

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It would be nice if being a Christian didn't compel us to make difficult choices about the way we are living our lives. But what would Christianity be if Jesus didn't challenge us to *grow* and to *change*?

Consider, first, the words of the prophet Amos, who lived about 800 years before Jesus. Amos had been a herdsman and a tree-farmer before God called him to take up a more difficult vocation: becoming a prophet of the Lord, speaking out publicly about the injustices and the sins of the society he was living in. Some of those injustices and sins are mentioned in today's passage; Amos rails against people who “turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground,” against people who “abhor the one who speaks the truth,” against those who “trample on the poor,” against those who “afflict the righteous,” against those who “take a bribe and push aside the needy.” The clues we get from Amos's book, other biblical sources, and archaeological remains point to a strong divide between the rich and the poor, between the “have”s and the “have-not”s, between those who live in fancy, ornate houses and those who have to beg for their bread. It is stunning to realize that there was *that* much economic disparity in ancient Israel *so long ago* – twenty-eight whole centuries! – and it is sometimes hard for us to wrap our minds around the fact that some of the people who lived in those ancient times truly lived in *luxury*. But that is what all the sources point to: a life of luxury and ease – for *some*, but not for *all*.

And if the economic disparity weren't bad enough, Amos points us to a deeper reality: there was *oppression*, there was *injustice*. It wasn't just that there were *rich* and *poor* – there was also a deeper problem: a lack of *righteousness* among the elite. *Sin* was rampant, in the form of bribery, extortion, exploitation, corruption, greed, stealing, dishonesty, infidelity, unfaithfulness, idolatry, hypocrisy, and the list goes on. Read the book for yourself – it's only nine chapters long – and make a list of the sins that the rich elite engaged in. It's *quite* a list, and it's *stunningly* relevant today. We haven't changed much since the eighth century BC; there's still a *tremendous* amount of social injustice in our world – and in our country! – today. Amos's main point – to put it very succinctly – is simply this: *God is not happy*. God sees all this injustice, God sees all this hypocrisy, God is indicting the wealthy elite for their sins, God is asking them – practically *begging* them – to change their ways, and God is warning them: *if you don't repent, judgment will come*. The survival of the *nation* is at risk because of these people's sins.

The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously quoted from the book of Amos, in his “I Have a Dream” speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. I'm going to repeat several sentences of what he said that day; the quote from Amos comes at the end: “There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, when will you be satisfied? We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies,

heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: for whites only. We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream." That last bit is from Amos; Amos, talking about the economic injustices in ancient Israel, had said: "Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Dr. King's message about the economic injustices in the United States was grounded in those words. Those *biblical* words.

Dr. King also quoted from the book of Amos in the open letter he wrote earlier that year from his cell in Birmingham Jail, in which he called Amos an "extremist for justice." In that letter he voiced a very strong critique of the Christian church: "I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen. . . . When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows. . . . In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: 'Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern.' . . . On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? Where were their voices when the lips of Governor Barnett dripped with words of interposition and nullification? Where were they when Governor Wallace gave a clarion call for defiance and hatred? . . . In deep disappointment I have wept over the laxity of the church. . . . There was a time when the church was very powerful—in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being 'disturbers of the peace' and 'outside agitators.' But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were 'a colony of heaven,' called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. . . . By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests. Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. . . . But the judgment of God is upon the church as never before. If today's church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions, and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club with no meaning for the twentieth century. Every day I meet young people

whose disappointment with the church has turned into outright disgust. . . .” Those strong words might make us a bit uncomfortable, just as Amos’s prophetic words certainly made the wealthy elite of ancient Israel more than a little uncomfortable. Prophetic voices are not easy to hear, because they challenge us to a higher and deeper form of righteousness than what we have been practicing. We’ve made progress since 1963, a *lot* of progress – but it’s become very clear over the past seven years that we haven’t made nearly *enough* progress. We are still *very far* from living into the hoped-for vision of economic justice and social righteousness that the biblical prophet Amos articulated twenty-eight centuries ago.

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Consider, second, the story from Mark’s gospel. A man runs up to Jesus and kneels before him. He has an urgent question he needs to ask: “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” This man “had many possessions”; in Luke’s version of this story, he is described as “very rich.” Now, unlike the question put to Jesus that we considered last week, this is a friendly question, a sincere question. This man genuinely wants to know what he must do “to inherit eternal life.” Evidently, he is worried about his *soul*. He has plenty of possessions, but he can’t take any of them with him when he dies; and it seems he is aware that there is something important, something *essential*, missing from the very core of his life. You can have all the *things* in the world, but that won’t help your *soul*. This man has finally realized that. In his life of plenty, something fundamental is *missing*. So he asks Jesus what to do.

Jesus reminds this man what he learned as a kid: “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.” Five of the Ten Commandments, plus another important Jewish ethical law. This man is earnest; he’s been practicing those his whole adult life – which is more than what can be said for a *lot* of people. Jesus invites him to do two more things: “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Go ... and then come. Go, into the world, sharing your wealth and resources with people who so desperately *need* it; then “come, follow me.” This man wants to know what he should do to inherit eternal life. Jesus’s reply: stop thinking so much about what you *want*, and start thinking about what other people *need*. There’s more than enough wealth to go around; there’s *no good reason* why people on this planet should be hungry or impoverished. This man’s fate is intimately bound up with what he does for the benefit of those far less fortunate than he is. He wants a place in heaven; he wants a seat at the eternal banquet table; he *knows*, deep in the core of his being, that despite all that he has, he is lacking something that can’t be bought. Jesus points out what it is: *generosity*. “How hard it will be,” says Jesus, “for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” Again: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Those of us who live relatively comfortable middle-class lives ought to sit up and take notice. How many of us are drowning in *stuff*, and empty in *soul*? How many of us are truly *rich* by global standards, while our souls feel so *impoverished*? *Greed* needs to give way to *generosity*; *selfishness* needs to give way to *selflessness*; *stinginess* needs to give way to *sharing*. Improving others’ *material* well-being improves our *spiritual* well-being. It’s as simple as that.

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