

Ps 82; Amos 7:7-17; Col 1:1-14; u 10:25-37

You and I live in a time when the greatest wrong is to judge another person. Over the past century, it has become the mark of enlightened, sophisticated thinking to demand the right to do as we please according to standards we set for ourselves. This trend has led to rejection of the Bible as the guide for a good life.

Christ has freed us from ritual and ceremonial laws. Jesus declared foods good to eat that are not on the kosher list. He also freed His followers from restricted Sabbath travel and other limits on behavior formerly called “unclean.” Animal sacrifice and rituals of ceremonial cleansing are gone. Christ makes us clean through His ultimate sacrifice – His death – and His glorious resurrection. He has given us everlasting life in His presence now. The greatest gift in the universe.

Old Testament prophets were already preaching that the rituals of temple life taught by the Levites are not enough to justify human sins. Just going through the motions is not enough. Today

we are reading Scriptures that reveal God's requirement that His people keep the moral law. Moral law is an absolute requirement, unlike the ritual and ceremonial laws.

The Prophet Amos was not a man of much education, yet God called Amos out of his farming and shepherding life in Judah to proclaim God's Word in Israel, the northern kingdom. Amos is called and anointed by the Lord Himself, to warn of God's judgment – not judgment of their rituals, nor judgment of their offerings, but judgment of their injustice, greed and idolatry. Amos condemns the hypocrisy and sin that has swallowed up the entire Israelite society. In our time we are in danger of reading prophetic judgment as a kind of meanness and unkindness. In fact, the warnings of consequences are sent by God as a loving and nurturing word. Back in Amos 5:6 the prophet said, “Seek the LORD that you may live...” The second half of the verse is: “or He will break forth like fire, O house of Joseph (meaning Israel), and it will consume with none to quench it for Bethel.” God sends this warning not in hatred, but in love.

The Prophet Amaziah who forbids Amos to preach and teach in Israel has credentials and is appointed as leader at Bethel, one of the mountain shrines (high places) where prophets lived together and served the royal court of Israel. Amaziah tells him go back to Judah if you want to prophesy. How dare you (says Amaziah) come over here to judge and condemn the administration, the courts, the clergy and the people of our nation. Amos says, “If you will not hear the Word of God, then you will be brought to shame, and conquered and you will go into exile in a foreign land.” (v 17)

On the surface Israel looked great in the 8th c BC. Jeroboam II had expanded the borders, taking back what Syria had captured. Trade was booming – there was wealth and leisure. The upper classes were living in luxury. But, as always happens when there is a super-rich class of people and a slave class of people, the rich maintain their extravagant lifestyle on the backs of the slaves. There is no middle class. All the wealth is in the hands of those in power. The remainder of the population are exploited.

Extreme poverty and suffering fall upon the majority. The wealthy few are free to take everything for their own use and pleasure. This leads to name-calling and persecution of the have-nots. They are called lazy, dishonest, lawless (because the laws are rigged to protect the wealthy). Hear the words of the Psalmist Asaph: “God presides in the heavenly council; in the assembly of the gods He gives His decision: You must stop judging unjustly; you must no longer be partial to the wicked! Defend the rights of the poor and the orphans; be fair to the needy and the helpless. Rescue them from the power of evil people.” (Ps 82:1-4) Do this and live, says the Lord.

When I was in mid-high, this letter appeared in the public forum:

“...I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the eighth-century prophets left their little villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns; and just as the Apostle Paul left his little village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to practically every hamlet and city of the Greco-

Roman world, I too am compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my particular hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.” (*Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Martin Luther King, [cn.edu/ documents](http://cn.edu/documents), accessed 07/09/19)

In the 18th c AD John Wesley wrote: “I am not afraid that the people called Methodists should ever cease to exist either in Europe or America. But I am afraid, lest they should only exist as a dead sect, having the form of religion without the power. And this undoubtedly will be the case, unless they hold fast...the doctrine, spirit, and discipline with which they first set out.”

(http://imarc.cc/one_meth/vol-02-no-02, accessed 07/09/19)

Today we see Amos’ vivid image of God standing beside the wall of Israel. God is testing the truth and righteousness of the entire society – from the king and his court to the lowliest ditch digger and kitchen helper.

Hold a plumb line to a piece of work such as a wall or a foundation, so you can test the soundness of it. Is it exactly 90°? Will it support the weight of floors, ceilings and roof? If it’s not plumb, it will crumble and become a pile of

rubble. God tells the people through His Prophet Amos: **Get the basics right.** Do this and live, says the Lord.

Jesus preached that the house built upon the Rock will weather any testing – any storm or shaking. (Mt 7:24-27) The Rock is the Word of God. Do this and live, says the Lord. The wily lawyer who came to test Jesus hears the story of the Good Samaritan, and Jesus tests him in turn. He gives the right answer: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” (Lu 10:17-18) Jesus says that’s right, a dreaded enemy – an unclean Samaritan gives care and compassion to a Jew, when so-called righteous people walk by on the other side of the road. Imagine **you** are the person half dead, naked in the ditch. The one who stops to take care of you is a member of Al Qaida. Wait! Love and compassion from an alien and dreaded enemy? Like Amos, MLK and John Wesley, we are called to cross the road and live out the Word of God for **all are** our neighbors. Do this and live. Amen.