

God's Generosity Overcomes Selfishness

Printed Text · AMOS 6:4-8, 11-14

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLORE God's response to injustice as recorded by Amos; feel RIGHTEOUS ANGER for ways people practice greed and selfishness; and DISCOVER ways God does justice amid injustice, and ways humans can join God in the fight against injustice.

In Focus

Craig was a successful businessman who worked for a large corporation. He lived in a massive mansion with a four-car garage in a gated community. Craig had attended several prestigious universities. The degrees he obtained helped promote Craig to a high position at his company. He quickly rose to an upper-level management position and had a huge office. Craig made over seven figures each year in salary, not including his annual bonus. He was living the good life.

Craig's driver would pick him up from his mansion daily and drive him to work. When the driver exited the highway, they typically drove through a poor neighborhood. Craig would often see people on the streets who looked as if they were homeless and suffering from different addictions. One day, as the car was approaching the office, Craig saw a young mother trying to walk her children to school. She was visibly struggling to push the stroller while tending to her two smaller children. Even though the scene caught Craig's attention, he chose to ignore the young mother and instructed the driver to proceed to the office.

God invites us to participate in ending the injustices that oppress other humans. In today's lesson, we will learn how God desires radical generosity. What are some ways you practice generosity towards others?

Keep In Mind

"Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow there with oxen? for ye have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock:" (Amos 6:12, KJV).

Words You Should Know

- A. **Chant** (Amos 6:5) parat (Heb.) – To improvise carelessly; to stammer.
- B. **Afflict** (v. 14) lakhats (Heb.) – To squeeze or oppress.

Say It Correctly

Lo-Devar. lo-de-BAR
Karnaim. kar-NAH-yim

KJV

AMOS 6:4 That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall;

5 That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David;

6 That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.

7 Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed.

8 The Lord GOD hath sworn by himself, saith the LORD the God of hosts, I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces: therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein.

11 For, behold, the LORD commandeth, and he will smite the great house with breaches, and the little house with clefts.

12 Shall horses run upon the rock? will one plow there with oxen? for ye have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock:

13 Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought, which say, Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?

14 But, behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel, saith the LORD the God of hosts; and they shall afflict you from the entering in of Hemath unto the river of the wilderness.

NLT

AMOS 6:4 How terrible for you who sprawl on ivory beds and lounge on your couches, eating the meat of tender lambs from the flock and of choice calves fattened in the stall.

5 You sing trivial songs to the sound of the harp and fancy yourselves to be great musicians like David.

6 You drink wine by the bowlful and perfume yourselves with fragrant lotions. You care nothing about the ruin of your nation.

7 Therefore, you will be the first to be led away as captives. Suddenly, all your parties will end.

8 The Sovereign LORD has sworn by his own name, and this is what he, the LORD God of Heaven's Armies, says: "I despise the arrogance of Israel, and I hate their fortresses. I will give this city and everything in it to their enemies."

11 When the LORD gives the command, homes both great and small will be smashed to pieces.

12 Can horses gallop over boulders? Can oxen be used to plow them? But that's how foolish you are when you turn justice into poison and the sweet fruit of righteousness into bitterness.

13 And you brag about your conquest of Lo-debar. You boast, "Didn't we take Karnaim by our own strength?"

14 "O people of Israel, I am about to bring an enemy nation against you," says the LORD God of Heaven's Armies. "They will oppress you throughout your land—from Lebo-hamath in the north to the Arabah Valley in the south."

The People, Places, and Times

Viol. The viol referenced in Amos 6:5 KJV were instruments similar to a harp or lyre. They were often used in temple worship and had ten strings (Psalm 33:2). The Hebrew word is also used for bottles or pitchers, probably because they had the same conical or triangular shape. They were plucked by hand instead of a pick and were mainly used during times of feasting and celebration.

Ointments. In biblical times, people used ointments for medicinal, cosmetic, and even religious purposes. These ointments served the purpose of not only healing the skin but also masking odors. They were similar to our modern lotion and made the skin glisten. Rubbing ointment on the body was often done in preparation for a festival and was a mark of sanctification. Oils or ointments were also used to prepare bodies for burial, and they marked various types of leaders as ordained by God (priests, prophets, kings). They could signify both luxury and holiness.

Hemath to the River of the Wilderness. Hemath was situated on the Orontes River and was the northern boundary of ancient Israel. Hemath represented the farthest north you could go before you ventured outside of Israel (Numbers 13:21). The river of wilderness was a desert wadi or brook that ran through the Arabah valley, which was a barren depression on the southern side of the Dead Sea. This brook flowed on the border of Moab and Edom. The river of the wilderness represented the farthest southern border of undivided Israel that could be inhabited. Thus the phrase “Hemath unto the river of the wilderness” encompassed the entirety of the undivided kingdom of Israel.

Background

The upper crust of Israel had become very complacent and comfortable with their wealthy lives. They were secure in the strength of their army and able to maintain a certain lifestyle that made them oblivious to the world around them. Those in leadership believed that Israel’s cities were superior to others because of their extravagant and materialistic luxuries. They had become so focused on their wealth that they had forgotten those who were suffering and less fortunate. Israel had forgotten that God had blessed them tremendously over the years. God had delivered them from oppressors and shown them favor. Unfortunately, they sinned against God by rejecting His call for love and obedience. They had also sinned against God by oppressing others and therefore violating His Law. Israel’s blatant disregard for others and overindulgence in their wealth angered God, provoking His wrath.

Amos proclaimed prophecies from God that convict leaders for a lack of social justice and warning them of the “day of the LORD” when judgment would come to Israel. He had opposed the nation’s sins and had encouraged them to repent for their evil and unjust ways. However, Israel had refused to turn away from their wickedness and remember the God they worshiped when they were in bondage. They were at risk for God’s divine punishment.

At-A-Glance

1. A Selfish Lifestyle (Amos 6:4–8)
2. Punishment for the Self-Indulgent (vv. 11–14)

In Depth

1. A Selfish Lifestyle (Amos 6:4–8)

The rich leaders of Samaria completely turn all of their attention to their material wealth. They are consumed with a lifestyle that is rich, elegant, exquisite, lavish, and excessive. They are only concerned with a higher standard of living that requires the finest and best. From dining selections, fine clothing, wild parties, extravagant celebrations, grand mansions, and

expensive skin creams, the influential people of Israel are accustomed to a lifestyle that only served an elite class. Their lifestyle causes them to lose focus on real-life issues around them. They are blind to the fact that as the elite become richer, the poor become poorer. Often when we experience an increase of wealth, we forget about God and the plight of others. The elite of Israel had only used their wealth for selfish and luxurious needs, forsaking those who were suffering among them. Amos declares an oath from the Sovereign Lord that God is angry at their conceited and arrogant way of living. God holds the wealthy accountable for the use of their resources and whether they use it for the blessing of others instead of selfishness.

2. Punishment for the Self-Indulgent (vv. 11–14)

The Lord has promised to enact severe punishment on Israel because of their refusal to repent. God will not only punish individuals, but plans to completely destroy their houses and buildings. The prophet explains that God will punish them because they twisted justice into a poison doing more harm than good. God mocks Israel for their prideful celebration over smaller cities that they had successfully conquered. Finally, their ultimate judgment is given as God announces that another force will be raised up against them to return the oppression that they have afflicted on others. Selfishness always ends with judgment; the selfish can expect to reap the fruits of what they have sown.

Search the Scriptures

1. What are the signs of the people of Israel's selfishness (Amos 6:4–6)?
2. What does the Lord despise and hate about Israel (v. 8)?

Discuss The Meaning

There is a huge debate on whether it is possible to be a follower of God and also have great wealth. Should Christians have nice things (cars, houses, clothing, etc.)? Does serving God mean that we can't spend our money on the things we can enjoy?

Liberating Lesson

In many places around the world, people are living in underserved and impoverished areas. They are suffering from lack of clean water, fresh produce, safe living conditions, and other resources that affect their everyday lives. There is not an equal distribution of wealth in our world. The powerful will continue to get rich, while the poor and working class will continue to suffer. The issue with wealth that is mentioned in this text is not the possession of wealth, but the dangers of being selfish, prideful, and sinful in the ways we use it. If we choose to ignore the injustices of the poor and needy, then we are at risk of God's punishment.

Application For Activation

We are tempted to ignore injustice when we are wealthy and comfortable. To combat this tendency, we can show solidarity with those who are disadvantaged. As a class, make a commitment to eat only one meal a day as an act of solidarity with those who live in hunger. While you are doing that, research ways in which you as a class can help fight global hunger. You can find many resources for this at the Bread for the World website (<http://www.bread.org/help>).

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Amos 6:4–8, 11–14

To understand what Amos is saying in his sixth chapter, it is necessary to explore the wider social context of Israel and Judah in his day. His prophetic ministry took place during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel (793–753 B.C.) and of Uzziah, also called Azariah, in Judah (792–740 B.C.), both of whom were strong monarchs with outstanding military prowess (Dunn 694). The main part of Amos' ministry probably occurred between 760 and 755 B.C., when both kingdoms enjoyed great prosperity and reached new political and military heights (2 Kings 14:23–25; 2 Chronicles 26:1–15). For instance, during his reign, Jeroboam managed to extend the borders of Israel as far north as Hamath (2 Kings 14:25; Amos 6:14).

This political and military success shaped the social conditions of Israel and Judah. Commerce was good and an upper class of prosperous merchants emerged. The rich became more materialistic, indulging deeply in luxury while the poor continued to be grossly taken advantage of. This was a time of rampant idolatry, immorality, corruption of judicial procedures, and oppression of the needy. In his commentary on Amos, David Hubbard observes that “at particular fault were the powerful, the landed, the wealthy, and the influential ... the leadership who had not only seduced the underprivileged from obedient worship of Yahweh but had conscripted their lands, confiscated their goods, violated their women and cheated them in business” (87). It was also a time of complacency. The kingdom of Israel—the primary audience of Amos' prophecy—was politically secure and spiritually smug. About forty years earlier, at the end of his ministry, Elisha had prophesied the resurgence of Israel's power (2 Kings 13:17–19), and more recently, Jonah had prophesied her restoration to a glory not known since the days of Solomon (2 Kings 14:25). Israel seemed and felt undefeatable (Amos 6:13, 9:10). Her leaders wrongly believed that the political and economic success was evidence that she was in God's good graces. This sense of security, in turn, increased Israel's religious and moral corruption. They lived like there was no judgment—like there was no tomorrow to face God. His past punishments for unfaithfulness were forgotten, and His patience was at an end—which Amos was sent to announce. In judgment, God would soon—in less than forty years—bring about the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom (722–721 B.C.). In

Amos 6, the prophet continues to denounce the sinful condition of the nation of Israel and the spiritual and moral decay of its leaders. Until now, they have been able to disregard and postpone the day of the Lord's judgment. Amos describes them in a rather grim and disturbing prophetic image of the complacent powerful reclining upon expensive couches, enjoying their entertainments, anointing themselves and their guests with the finest perfumes, indulging lavishly in expensive wines, with vocal and instrumental music, all while neglecting the true worship of Jehovah. So, the prophet indicts (6:1), warns (v. 2), rebukes (vv. 3–6), pronounces impending judgment (vv. 7–11), and declares that the judgment is inevitable (vv. 12–14). His prophecy continues the doom that was pronounced upon Israel at the conclusion of Amos 2 (vv. 6–16). This chapter begins with an exclamation of "Woe," the second in this series of such indictments, the first one being at 5:18.

4 That lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat the lambs out of the flock, and the calves out of the midst of the stall; 5 That chant to the sound of the viol, and invent to themselves instruments of musick, like David; 6 That drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the chief ointments: but they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.

Verse 4 continues the woe that was declared in verse 1. In essence, he is saying, "Woe to you who put far off the day of doom . . . who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments . . . who drink wine from bowls . . . but are not grieved." The leaders of Israel lie on ivory divans, sprawl on couches, feast on tender lamb and veal, amuse themselves by improvising babbling sounds of the harp. Each one of these items would have earlier been only possible for royalty, being so distant to actual village life. Amos had earlier prophesied against the houses of ivory, and now, it was the beds overlaid with ivory that invoked judgment (3:15). The eating of meat (lambs) with any regularity was the privilege of the wealthy. "The general population lived on wheat and barley and whatever fruits and vegetables were at hand, and if they had meat at all, reserved it for times of high celebration. . . . In contrast, Samaria's elite not only ate animals at random but also put their calves in special stalls to fatten them, undoubtedly on grain wrested from the poor" (Hubbard 193). Of course, Amos had earlier said that this luxury is obtained through robbery and violence against the poor (3:10).

The reclining (or lying down) and sprawling in verses 4 and 7 depict not just comfort but drunken torpor—possibly of the religious kind like those mentioned in Isaiah 65:11 and Jeremiah 44:17. The traditional custom in Israel at the time was to eat while sitting on rugs or seats. The practice of reclining at meals that Amos describes here is foreign. The Hebrew *sarakh* (sah-RAHKH), translated "sprawl" (NLT), means to "go free, unrestrained," and is used in Arabic for camels left loose to pasture where they choose and of hair hanging loose (Snaith 112). Hubbard adds that it may also mean "free fall" from weakness or fatigue (Hubbard 193).

The word *parat* (Heb., pah-RAHT), generally translated "to chant," "to improvise," or "to sing extemporaneously," suggests a flow of trivial words in which the rhythm of words and music was everything but the sense and meaning nothing (Hubbard 193). Amos attacks the wealthy for overindulgence in food, drink, luxurious ointments and leisure to the point that they neglect those in need. They think that because they live a luxurious lifestyle and practice music, they are like David, God's beloved, but they deceive themselves in their thoughts and practices. *Mizraq* (Heb., meez-RAHK) suggests that they used special bowls or basins for their wine-drinking, not ordinary cups.

However we understand Amos' imagery, their parties feature extreme extravagance and careless ease. The whole chapter pictures an upper class too self-centered and intent on its own pleasure as to find Amos' prediction of catastrophe credible. We see their apathy expressed in the clause, "they are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph," i.e., their own Northern Kingdom. Hubbard interprets this to say they have been sick for the wrong reasons: their drunkenness and their mourning of the dead (6:9–10). As they enjoyed all their luxuries, they had not even the slightest concern for the broken-down state of the nation of Israel. Much like today, selfishness and greed cause people to only look for their own comfort, often at the expense of the needy. The sufferings of the oppressed and wronged do not touch them at all. If anything, the presence of the underprivileged is advantageous to the greedy leaders, who made their wealth by oppressing them.

7 Therefore now shall they go captive with the first that go captive, and the banquet of them that stretched themselves shall be removed. 8 The Lord GOD hath sworn by himself, saith the LORD the God of hosts, I abhor the excellency of Jacob, and hate his palaces: therefore will I deliver up the city with all that is therein.

The prophet's "therefore" begins to conclude the rebuke. Everything—all their drunken, gluttonous orgies—will come to an end. Their God, the Great I AM, who revealed Himself to Israel in Egypt as One who heard their cry and knew their sufferings there (Exodus 3:7), cannot bear this revelry. God will intervene and judge the oppressors. Just as He rejects the sound of their worship (Amos 5:21–24), God also finds the noise of their amusement nauseous. These careless leaders of today will tomorrow lead the pitiful column of captives who go into exile. Thus, with tragic irony, Amos declares that they will be first to the bitter end. These notables of the "chief of the nations" (v. 1) who used "chief ointments" (v. 6) are now to be "first that go captive" (v. 7). Where revelry fills the air, there shall remain only ominous silence (Mays 117). This prophecy emphasizes the unusually strong announcement of judgment that Amos also gives in 4:2, "The Lord GOD hath sworn by his holiness." Mays observes, "That Yahweh takes oath on his own person (as in Jeremiah 22:5, 49:13, 51:14) makes the decree more final, because the total force of Yahweh's integrity is invested in this solemn oath—the ancient Near East's most binding form of commitment" (118).

The language used here is "the strongest possible language God used to express wrath ... the language of abhorrence, hatred and chiasm" (Hubbard 195). The Lord abhors the "excellency of Jacob." This pride of Jacob—which might actually be the city of Samaria (Dunn 694)—speaks of Israel's national self-confidence, which meant their displacement of Yahweh as the foundation of their national existence. In the season of great prosperity and success, Israel's leaders have lifted their hearts high in overconfidence, putting their pride in their fortified cities. However, God is about to judge their pride by sending an army that will bring them low. In addition, God hates the palaces of Jacob—the strongholds that give Israel a sense of self-sufficiency and security, but are filled with the spoils of robbery and violence. They are like a monument before God as constant reminders of the pride of the rich and the plight of the poor. Mays adds, "The city and its strongholds ... enshrines the worst of Israel's guilt. The powerful rich may think themselves invulnerable against any foe, but when Yahweh is against them, their strength is useless and their defenses already breached" (119). Thus, when all has been said and done, God will deliver the city and everything inside to a foreign army. This chapter concludes with the promise that God will raise up a nation against Israel to afflict them (v. 14). Assyria defeated Israel in 721/722 B.C., during the reign of King Hoshea of Israel.

11 For, behold, the LORD commandeth, and he will smite the great house with breaches, and the little house with clefts. In judgment, God will smite the great house with breaches and the small house with clefts.

Some scholars have said that the great house stands for Israel and the small house is Judah. For instance, Jerome interprets the former being reduced to branches or ruins, literally, "small drops"; the latter, though injured with "clefts" or rents, which threaten its fall, is still permitted to stand (Mays 120). Other scholars believe that "great house" and "small house" have nothing to do with Israel and Judah. This is because Amos primarily prophesied to the former and not the latter, and there is no other evidence of these terms being used for Israel and Judah. A better interpretation of the verse is that the judgment would come to both wealthy and poor. Both great and small suffered equally. No distinction will be made; the rich and the poor will fall together. When the great houses are all carried away by their captors, the small houses will not escape. Why? Not only are the poor abused and neglected by the wealthy during times of national prosperity, but they will be implicated in the punishment as well, either because they are led astray in worship or because they are politically associated with those in power. Destruction and death do not spare anyone.

12 Shall horses run upon the rock? Will one plow there with oxen? for ye have turned judgment into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock: 13 Ye which rejoice in a thing of nought, which say, Have we not taken to us horns by our own strength?

Horses do not run on cliffs like mountain goats, nor can one plough through boulders with an ox. These are both absurd scenarios. In turning "judgement into gall, and the fruit of righteousness into hemlock" (a bitter and noxious plant), the Israelites are acting perversely. Thus, as horses and oxen are useless on a rock, so the Israelites are making justice poisonous. The absurd is happening in Israel. Arnold Schultz interprets this verse as saying, "There is a spiritual and moral order in the universe that is just as impossible to ignore as the natural order. It is as senseless to pervert justice as it is to expect horses to run on the rocks, or for oxen to plow on rock" (835). It is, thus, easier to change the course of nature than the course of God's providence or the laws of His just retribution.

The national leaders feel proud and confident because under Jeroboam, Israel had recaptured some territory that it had formerly lost to Aram (2 Kings 14:25). These recaptured lands included the town of Lodebar in Transjordan (2 Samuel 9:4, 17:27). Amos, however, cleverly make light of this feat by deliberately misspelling the city's name as "Lo-debar" (v. 13, NLT), which means "not a thing" (Mays 122). They have taken nothing of much value. The people are also claiming that they took the town of Karnaim (whose name means "a pair of horns," symbols of strength) by their own strength. It is not they but Yahweh, however, who had strengthened them to achieve this victory over a symbolically strong town. Therefore, Israel's leaders celebrate the capture of nothing and think they have captured it by their own strength (Mays 122).

14 But, behold, I will raise up against you a nation, O house of Israel, saith the LORD the God of hosts; and they shall afflict you from the entering in of Hemath unto the river of the wilderness.

Archaeological reports suggest that the capture was exactly and terribly fulfilled just as God had promised. Less than forty years after Amos wrote this prophecy, the Northern Kingdom was destroyed by Sargon of Assyria. "Behold" indicates God's resolute emphasis, as Yahweh had sworn by Himself (v. 8). God, through His power and sovereignty, raises up Sargon and the Assyrian empire to defeat and oppress the nation of Israel. "With power, he

identifies himself as the Lord of all armies and with specificity, he directs his announcement to the whole house of Israel” (Hubbard 200). Selfishness, greed, and pride do not only affect the leaders of the nation; they affect everyone. The influence of Israel’s leaders has corrupted the nation. Thus, the whole house of Israel is doomed to disaster by the complacency and corruption of their leaders.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Luke 11:37-42

Tuesday

Proverbs 16:1-11

Wednesday

Philippians 1:12-20

Thursday

Luke 12:15-21

Friday

Psalms 119:31-38

Saturday

Psalms 37:14-22

Sunday

Amos 6:4-8, 11-14