



Isn't God Supposed to Bless Me?

TEXT
Amos 6:4-7

September 29, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

God called Amos to be a prophet during the reign of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam II ruled for forty years in the 8th century BCE. Many called it the golden age of Israel. Israel's neighbors were weakened, and Jeroboam was able to open a trade route called the "King's Highway." This ushered in an age of prosperity.

You hear it in Amos' words: *You lie on beds of ivory and drink wine from bowls, and feast on lambs while minstrels play the harp.* It was the good life. But the economic benefit was concentrated. Many were left out. The royal family and the prominent members of society were awash in luxury, and of course there was some trickle-down. But life was pretty different for those from whom a little trickled than for those who were left to live on a trickle.

That is why God sent Amos to Israel. And in the midst of what many saw as a golden age, Amos proclaimed that things were actually in the process of falling apart. It seemed counterintuitive to folks, but Amos said that Israel was actually collapsing, and would soon go into exile. He turned out to be right about that. When the As-

syrians thundered in, and these erstwhile prominent folks were spread across the Assyrian empire, the ten lost tribes of Israel, they asked God, "Why did this happen?"

Whether you think Israel was overthrown by an outside force or crumbled from the inside may depend on how important you think the teaching of Amos is. It's important to note that Amos did not condemn those who benefited from the economy for their success; he condemned them for their apathy regarding their neighbor. In Chapter 2, he says, *You sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals — you trample the head of the poor into the dust.*

For Amos, poverty was not just an economic issue; it was a spiritual issue. In that, folks agreed with him. Those who were well off saw their economic status as a sign of God's blessing. But Amos says, God may not be who you think she is.

In 1880, Rev. Russell Conwell preached a sermon that over the years he preached 6,000 times. You guys think I repeat stories; this guy preached the same sermon 6,000 times. It was titled *Acres of Diamonds*, and he proclaimed that God wants you to be wealthy. The opportunity to

be wealthy is within the reach of every single person, and there is no more holy work than acquiring wealth. Conwell was an early voice in what's known today as the prosperity gospel.¹ If you are my age or older, you know many of these voices from TV, such preachers as Oral Roberts and Jim and Tammy Bakker. Currently, such evangelists include Joel Osteen and an Atlanta preacher named Credflo Dollar (yes, that is his real name). Dollar proclaims that God wants to send you money. Kate Bowler has studied this movement, and she notes that the theology is that God will bring you wealth, but first you must be generous to the church. If you tithe, God will reward you financially.²

Now look, I think giving to the church is important. And my own experience is that being generous to the church is something which I find meaningful. But I find it insulting to use tithing as an investment program. But the prosperity gospel preachers proclaim just that, and many of them amass vast amounts of wealth, planes, gold-plated bathrooms, air-conditioned houses for their dogs — all as evidence, they say, of God's blessing in their lives.

I trust you know that people of wealth and people of poverty

are all children of God. Someone who drives a nicer car than you is not more favored by God than you. And someone who has no car at all is not less favored by God. You know that.

At the same time, I wonder if we all don't have a little prosperity gospel in us. I mean, God is supposed to bless us, right? God is supposed to make life abundant, right? And when life does fall in pleasant places, we feel blessed, right?

This is complicated because Jesus says, *I want you to have life abundant, but at the same time, money is not a sign of God's favor.* So, what is at stake here?

Amos says, *The community is falling apart because you are not "grieved over the ruin of Joseph."* They suffer and you don't see it.

First of all, I don't know if that is us. Every day, scores of you volunteer at our food pantry. Every week, scores of you volunteer as tutors at Faxon School, seeking to give those children the life skills necessary to succeed. You swing hammers for Habitat. Hillcrest Transitional Housing is in Johnson County helping families get off the streets, and they wouldn't be successful without Village. At Christmastime, you collect gifts for children whose parents are incarcerated. Last year, we partnered with Thelma's Kitchen to help them create a pay-what-you-can café, where people of all walks of life can dine at the same table. In a few weeks, you will hear about our 2019 Signature Mission called Avenue of Life, as they are finding homes for homeless students.

At Village, we battle poverty. I think that is faithful. But still I am pushed by this 8th century prophet. Because if I understand the text, Amos says that God views poverty not as something unfortunate, but as evidence that something has gone wrong.

A common and attractive explanation of what has gone wrong is to blame poverty on the poor. We are told that success relies on hard work and the discipline to live within your means. Everyone has the opportunity to succeed; as Rev. Conwell said 6,000 times, God has an acre of diamonds waiting for everyone. So, if you don't find success, it is because you are lazy or live beyond your means.

This belief is attractive because there is an element of truth here. These virtues are required to succeed in life. But we all know people, some in our own families, who have worked hard, lived a disciplined life and things have still fallen apart. The temptation to blame poverty on the poor removes any responsibility to look at the whole community.

If I understand Amos, he says poverty is not the problem; poverty is the symptom of a community that is falling apart. So, the problem is not us and them; it's all us.

I'm reading David Brooks' recent book, *The Second Mountain*. He observes what he calls the catastrophe of hyper-individualism in American culture.³ I find him wise about this. He says, "There is always tension between self and society. If things are too rightly bound, then the urge to rebel is strong. But we've got the

opposite problem. ... In a culture of hyper-individualism, we are lonely and loosely attached. Community is attenuated, connections are dissolved, and loneliness spreads." He further asserts, we have been taught that the only real motives in human life are the ones of self-interest. We have normalized selfishness, he says.⁴

The tension between the self and the community is in the air we breathe.

The prophets warn us that wealth can tempt us to be isolated from the lives of those in need, to assume that all is well and not recognize that community is eroding.

I don't know if you are into baseball statistics, but Whit Merrifield, who plays second base for the Royals, unless he is in right field, with one game to go, leads major league baseball in hits, with 206. And Jorge Soler, the designated hitter for the Royals, has hit more home runs than any Royal ever before, passing Moose's record of 38. Soler will end the year with 47, unless he goes out with a bang today.

Those guys are having a record-setting year. And the Royals have benefited no doubt, but in spite of the success of some players, the Royals are one of three teams in the American League who have over 100 losses. That's a terrible year. It's not about the players; it's about the team.

Brooks says there is always tension between the self and the community.

The prophets teach us that the blessing of God is known most richly not in the self, but in

the team, in the community. The prophets tell us that we need to be particularly mindful of the poor — not simply to serve them, but because poverty is a sign that the community is eroding.

There are striking similarities between our day and the days of Jeroboam. I don't know the way forward on this crucial matter. Here's my suggestion: In this culture of hyper-individualism, we need a different conversation about our community.

We live in a 24-hour news cycle that is increasingly polarized. We no longer have political seasons, but seem to be campaigning all the time and governing almost never. A consequence of this is that America lives a binary life, with those on the edges controlling the conversation. It's either all individual or total collective. That kind of binary thinking is killing us.

I think the blessing of God is intended for communities, not just for a few. So, our work with the poor is holy work. At Village, we need to continue to battle the crushing realities of poverty. But we don't do this simply because we have a service to offer. No, we need to know them because the central teaching of the faith is to love the neighbor. We can't love who we do not know.

¹Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013), p. 31

²*Ibid.*, Chapter 3

³David Brooks, *The Second Mountain* (2019), p. 17, 20

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 22

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.