

Amos 2:6-16

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[0 : 00] Well, football pundits are not known for being people who have great deep insights into life. They might have great insights about football formations or managers strategies, but rarely about fundamental principles of life.

However, I clearly remember one great exception. A long time ago, it was the 94-95 football season. Newcastle United were playing in some European tournament. I think they were playing a big team. I think it was Barcelona. I can't remember. That doesn't matter. And they were 2-0 up at half-time at St. James' Park. And the pundits back in the studio were raving about the performance.

And at the end of the match, they squandered it. I can't remember if it was a draw or they lost. I don't recall. But I went back to the studio and Des Lynam, who was the anchor man at the time, just turned to Alan Hansen and just said, Well, Alan?

And Hansen delivered a line that only a sort of Church of Scotland minister of my youth where I grew up could deliver. He stared at the camera and in his low tones uttered, Complacency is an evil word.

[1 : 09] And he may not have been talking about Newcastle United. He could have been talking about Israel in 760 BC, the year that Amos was preaching. They were complacent people.

They took God's grace for granted. They enjoyed the privilege of being God's people, but had forgotten the purpose for which they were God's people. They enjoyed the privileges, but forgot their purpose in God saving them.

Not only that, but the way Amos has been speaking up to now might have confirmed them in their complacency. If you read through chapter 1 up to chapter 2 verse 5, you'll see that Amos has been declaring God's judgment against all the nations around them.

Against their bitter enemies, the Amorites, who in chapter 1 verse 13 had invaded a bit of Israel and killed pregnant women, ripping them open. The Israelites would have been delighted to hear God's judgment against them.

And then Amos had pronounced God's judgment on Judah to the south, their tiny insignificant neighbour, those self-righteous ones who had the temple in Jerusalem, who were still under a king in David's line.

[2 : 14] And of course that meant Amos had preached against seven nations. Seven, the Hebrew idea, number of completeness. So at chapter 2 verse 5, the congregation are expecting Amos to sit down.

They're cheering. Well done, God's going to judge those horrible people around us. They'd be confirmed in their complacency. But Amos has a shock for them, in that the longest judgment is the eighth one.

I've told my sermons like this, they feel like I'm coming into land and then I take off again. That's what Amos does. That's a warning for later on, by the way. That's what Amos does here. He takes off again and God's greatest judgment, the longest piece of text is directed against Israel in verses 6 to 16.

Against their complacency. They are enjoying the privileges of being God's people, but have forgotten the purpose. Now I wonder how often we can be like that as Christians. We can turn up at church, we can enjoy the gospel message that we are forgiven freely by God's grace, which we are. And we enjoy that privilege, but become complacent about the purpose for which God saved us. What is that purpose? Well, it's the same as the purpose of saving Israel in the Old Testament.

[3 : 26] Exodus chapter 19, verses 5 and 6, God had said, you will be to me a holy nation, and a royal priesthood. And those are words that Peter picks up in 1 Peter chapter 2, where he says this

of Christians today, you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession.

Why? That you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. As those who have been rescued by God's grace, were to show his beauty, his excellencies, and declare those to the world around us.

Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you have not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. The people of Amos' day were complacent because they just counted the privilege and forgot the purpose.

We can become complacent when we remember that God is love, but forget that he is light. When we remember what we've been saved from, sin and death and hell, but not what we've been saved for, to be a holy nation and a royal priesthood.

So Amos' words to Israel in 790 BC are also relevant to us today. Because his message is essentially that God has graciously provided everything you need for salvation.

[4 : 51] And therefore, God's people must show his holiness in every facet of our lives. Well, how were the people of Israel failing to do that? Well, in two main ways. They dishonoured God by their actions.

They dishonoured God by their actions. That's verses 6 to 9. And they despised God's gracious gifts. Verses 9 to 12. Let's look at those things first before we turn and see how it works out for us. So first of all, they despised God's character through their actions. Look at verse 7 for a moment. To the end of verse 7. There's a key phrase there. What does Amos say? My holy name is profaned. They were supposed to be a holy people showing God's excellency and glory and light. But they were dragging God's name through the mud by the way they acted. They did that in three particular ways.

First of all, by their social interactions. And then by their sexual practices. And then finally, by their self-centred worship. So first of all, they're social practices.

[5 : 53] That's what Amos is talking on about in verse 6 for example. Thus says the Lord, for three transgressions of Israel and for four, I will not revoke the punishment. Because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.

Now the righteous in this context are not the morally perfect, but they're the legally innocent. They're the innocent party in a civil case in the law courts. But what's happening is rather than the judges exercising justice fairly, the judges are being bought with a bribe.

You can pay them silver and they're ruling the rich person's favour. Or give them a bit of land. Perhaps that's what the sandals refers to. Land being transacted. And they'll make the right, they'll call the innocent person guilty.

There was no justice there. And yet the Lord is just. So they're dishonouring his character. Also there's a lack of mercy. The Lord is merciful.

Remember in Israel's history he rescued them out of slavery in Egypt. Not because of anything they had done, but because he heard their cry and was faithful to his promises. Yet look how, look how the Israelites are treating the poor and needy.

[7 : 04] Look at verse 7. You who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth and turn aside from the way of the afflicted. The afflicted are downtrodden with no strength or resources of their own.

And yet where God has shown mercy to the Israelites, they are not showing mercy to each other. They are despising the weak and the needy. Now what we need to remember as we read these words, who they're addressed to.

It's very easy, isn't it, to look out on the world and see injustice around the world. Or look out on our society and see where the poor and the afflicted are trodden upon. But this is not written to any particular nation.

This is God's word to Israel. Israel were his covenant people. People who had entered into relationship with God at Mount Sinai. The people he called for his own possession. So first and foremost, we need to read this as to us, the church, to God's people on earth.

And not worry about the sins of the nations around us or the culture we're part of. So the challenge for us as we read about Israel's social sins is what are our social practices?

[8 : 11] Do we dishonour God's name in the way we act together as a people? I'm sure we're good and tender-hearted towards those who are financially poor and afflicted.

See they drop in here as I look at the news sheet. That's great. But I wonder how we deal with other kinds of affliction. I know of people who have struggled with mental health issues in church for years, be it depression or bipolar disorder.

And they never feel they can voice their difficulties and voice their problems because they feel they'll be judged and disregarded and maybe trampled on. How do we deal with those in that kind of affliction?

Are we merciful and compassionate as God is? Or do we disregard, turn aside from the way of the afflicted as the Israelites did? So they dishonoured God through their social practices but also through their sexual practices.

Look at verse 7. The end of verse 7. A man and his father go into the same girl so that my holy name is profaned. There's a pattern here.

[9 : 17] Once again, it's the powerful exploiting the weak. The powerful, the men who had the rights and the property and everything else in society. Oppressing the vulnerable, the weak, the girl in this case.

And again, whereas the Lord is faithful, here's a picture of a man totally bailing out in his marriage vows and maybe even taking his son along with him.

It's a picture of sexual promiscuity of the worst type. Because the question for us is how does our sexual conduct honour God?

In a sex-mad society, a society where we read that 50% of men in a church will be addicted to internet pornography. Does our conduct in private that God sees honour him?

Well, it wasn't just their social practices and their sexual practices, it was also their self-centred worship practices. Look at verse 8. They lay themselves down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge.

[10 : 19] In the house of their God they drink the wine of those who've been fined. Almost every line there is a contradiction of the law of Moses. The bottom line is they were being completely self-centred in what they did when they gathered to worship God.

It wasn't God they were worshipping. It was their own desires, their own lusts, their own satisfaction. You can imagine the kind of conversations these guys would have had when they went into the office on the next day, the day after the Sabbath.

If you can imagine them going to an office the day after the Sabbath. What did you do on the Sabbath then? Oh, it was great. I just went up to the shrine just behind my house. It's very convenient.

You don't have to go anywhere. It's just up there on the hill. And there's a very nice shrine prostitute up there so I spent some time with her. And I didn't want to get my own coat dirty so I took the coat that I'd taken from the beggar at the end of our road, the guy who owes me some money.

Now he must have been cold last night because I hadn't given this coat back to him. I know you're supposed to but hey, I don't care about him. I was able to lie down on his garment so mine didn't get dirty. I had a great time up at the shrine and then the priest came around at the end with all the wine he confiscated from the fines from other people and we had a wild party and drunk till dawn.

[11 : 33] It was great. In fact, it's a miracle I've been able to get into work this morning I've got such a bad hangover. Now, I know that doesn't go on here at IPC, it doesn't go on at Duke Street in Richmond either. But, but, we need to see behind this the self-centeredness involved in this.

Not only the self-centeredness but the way they were worshipping their God was not the way God had declared they should through the scriptures. but it was the way the nations around them were worshipping their gods.

Shrine prostitutes and all that kind of stuff altars wherever you wanted them lots of alcohol that was what the nations around them did. This was syncretistic worship.

It was borrowing ideas and practices from the world around them rather than faithful worship of the true God the way he had revealed. Now, are there ways in which we can borrow ideas from the world around us and they incorporate themselves into the way we worship God?

Even here in a good solid church like IPC Ewing or even in Duke Street in Richmond. Well, let me suggest a couple of ways we can end up doing this inadvertently.

[12 : 45] In this day and age Eastern religion is very popular, isn't it? Fits in with our culture of post-modernism and the idea of meditation is a popular idea especially a stressed out busy age where everyone feels like they're online 24 hours.

So meditation is a very popular thing. But Eastern meditation is all about emptying your mind, having nothing in your mind. Biblical meditation is about filling your mind with God's word. That's one area where sometimes we can talk very loosely about meditation and we end up thinking about all sorts of stuff that isn't what the Bible describes as meditation. So we can dishonor God in our worship practices.

Or when going to church is all about our own preferences, the kind of music we like, the kind of things we like, we can end up just fulfilling our own selfish practices. Or I have friends who go to some churches who will say, oh we had a great time of worship, which they've just been singing, and we sang such and such a song several times and then God really showed up. Really? Really? Do you think you can cajole God into action by the amount you play your music or by the way you sing? That's not a service of corporate worship, that's a rock concept.

[14:06] What you're experiencing is just your own emotions. Our emotions are good, our emotions should be engaged in worship, but if we confuse our emotions with God's presence, if we act like we have to do something to make God appear, then that's just the same basic idea as every religion in the world, that what God does is dependent upon what we do.

The Christianity and the gospel is the other way around. What God has done leads us to do what we do. See, they dishonoured God with their self-centred syncretistic worship practices, with their sexual practices, and with their social practices.

They dishonoured God in all those ways. In their complacency, they didn't just dishonour God through their actions, but they despised God's gift in their attitudes.

That's what Amos is talking about in verses 9-12. Can you look at those? Look at verse 9. He reminds them there that the Lord defeated their enemies. What does the Lord say?

Yet it was I who destroyed the Amorite from before them. The Amorites were the big guys who they'd been very scared of as they left Egypt. Numbers 13, the spies who Moses sent out, specifically incite the Amorites as a good reason not for going into the promised land.

[15:24] Yet the Lord destroyed them. The Amorites whose height was like the height of the Caesars, and who were as strong as the oaks, are destroyed their fruit above and their roots beneath. They were completely wiped out by the Lord.

He wiped them out because of their sin, as he promised Abraham back in Genesis 15-6. And yet now Israel were living in the Amorites land as if they just deserved it, as if they got it by right or by their own strength.

They despised God's gift and their attitude to it. Not only does the Lord defeat their enemies, he delivered them from slavery. Verse 10, also it was I who brought you out of the land of Egypt. They couldn't have saved themselves as poor slaves in Egypt. It took God's great, powerful action, and strong, mighty arm to deliver them, to give them freedom, just as we cannot save ourselves from slavery to sin.

The Lord also taught them dependency in the wilderness. Look at verse 10, continuing, I brought them out of the land of Egypt and led you for forty years in the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.

[16:31] Do you remember what happened in those wilderness wandering? At every point the Lord provided for their need. We want food. He provided manna from heaven. Six days a week, fifty-two weeks of the year, forty years they were walking.

He provided water from rock. He looked after them, he cared for them. The soles of their shoes didn't even wear out. What was he teaching them? He was teaching them that they were dependent upon him, not on their own power or their own strength, but on him.

And how does that apply to us? Well, the Lord has defeated our enemies, hasn't he? The Lord Jesus Christ on the cross triumphed over the powers and authorities, as Paul puts it in Colossians 2 15.

He defeated our enemies. He has delivered us from slavery, from this present evil age, from our slavery to sin, from the slavery of having to try and earn our way to God. Jesus has defeated all that, delivered us from that, through the cross.

And he's teaching us dependency upon him. Like the Israelites in the desert, we are currently wandering in the wilderness, on our way to the promised land, on our way to the new creation that we receive when Christ returns.

[17:44] And in this life, in this pilgrimage through the wilderness, we are dependent upon him. He pours his spirit into our hearts when we trust in Christ, who changes us, who transforms us, who

gives us gifts, to rely on him throughout our lives.

So we have these same gracious gifts, but exponentially bigger than what the Israelites received. And that wasn't the end of the gifts. Look at verse 11. Now the prophets were God's gift to instruct his people, and the Nazarites were God's gift to inspire his people.

The prophets declared God's word to them. That was their job, not to tell the future, but to speak God's word, to help them keep on track, to remind them of their covenant commitment, and of God's covenant commitment to them.

The Nazarites, you can read about in number 6, they were people who took a vow to be separated to the Lord. And as such, they were a kind of example, an illustration, an inspiration to Israel for what their lives could be, as those who were set apart for God.

But one of the key parts of the Nazarites' vows was that they wouldn't drink alcohol. You know, look at how the Israelites despised their gift. verse 12.

[19 : 13] You made the Nazarites drink wine, and you commanded the prophets, you shall not prophesy. In other words, they despised God's gracious gift, they despised the prophets, I don't want to listen to your word, God, they despised the Nazarites, I don't want to see an example, an inspiration of what a life set apart to you is like.

Now how does God give us those things today? Well, he doesn't give us prophets anymore, because he's given us the final prophets. The Lord Jesus, Hebrews chapter 1, verse 1, God spoke to us in the former days through the prophets, but in these last days, he's spoken to us by his Son. Not only through Jesus the word incarnate, but now through the word in scripture, the Bible that we have, and the Holy Spirit, who helps us to grasp this truth. God speaks to us.

So how do we tell God's word to be silent now? Well, maybe some of you are thinking, Stuart, be quiet, we've heard enough, so you might want to be telling me to be silent. But aren't there other ways we do it?

We've got God's word in our own languages. Yet isn't it true we sometimes find it easier to check out the internet, to surf on Facebook, to see what people are doing, rather than open the scriptures?

[20 : 24] Christians. The sense in which when we're doing that, we're despising God's gracious gift of his word to us. It's like telling the prophets to be quiet. What about Nazarites?

He doesn't give us Nazarites today. But can't you think of people who God has brought across your life, who are inspirations to you of a life devoted to the Lord's service, where you see God's grace so clearly?

I think of a dear lady in our own church, who was a missionary for many years in Thailand, who as a single lady, she would love to have had children, but instead she's invested her life, she says I've got hundreds of grandchildren and children now, in the way that she's loved and opened her heart to people of every generation.

She's an inspiration to me of self-giving and love for Jesus. Or think of families I know who, yes, they've got pots and pots of money, but they use that so generously, supporting Christian service, opening homes, giving holiday homes to people to use.

They're an inspiration of a life set apart for the God. Now what do we do with those people? Do we thank God for them? Do we encourage them? Or do we try and ignore them?

[21 : 36] Or do we even discourage them, even if we try and sound loving at the point, as we talk to them? Oh, it's great what you're doing, but maybe you need to just take it easy, take a bit more time for yourself, look after yourself.

Do we sometimes inadvertently discourage people? A bit like the Israelites saying to the Nazarites, go have a drink, relax, don't take everything too seriously. Well, these are God's gracious gifts.

Do we despise them in our attitudes, or are we grateful for them, as the Israelites were not? Well, in their complacency, they dishonoured God by their actions, they despised God's gifts through their attitudes.

So what was going to happen to them? Well, verse 13 to 16, let's prepare to be destroyed by God's judgment. Look at verse 13. Behold, I will press you down in your place, as a cart full of sheaves presses down.

The images of a loaded cart at harvest time, pressing down on the ground. Israel are going to be pressed down by God's wrath, his punishment against them for the way they have treated him and broken their covenant promises.

[22 : 49] And who's going to escape the squashing? Who's going to escape God's judgment? Verse 14. Flight shall perish from the swift, the strong shall not retain his strength, nor shall the mighty save his life.

Usain Bolt cannot outrun it, the world's strongest man cannot stand against it, the world's greatest survival expert and brave man, be it Bear Grylls or some die from the SAS, will not be able to outlast it.

It goes on. He who handles the boat shall not stand, he who is swift of foot shall not save himself, nor shall he who rides the horse save his life. No weapon can stave off God's wrath.

No bravery, no military power. Verse 16. And he who is stout of heart among the mighty shall flee away naked in that day, declares the Lord.

Do you hear what God is saying? You've been complacent, you've dishonoured my character, you despised my gifts, after all I've done for you. No one is going to be able to stand when I act in anger.

[23 : 58] But sure enough, 722 BC, the Assyrians came in and destroyed Samaria, wiped out Israel. The punishment they thought could never come came.

Now it's easy isn't it for us to say, well hang on, we're under the new covenant now, we're not under the law like these people were. Surely it's different for us Christians. Well, it's different in the grace we have received is even greater, the rescue we've received, the deliverance, the gifts, all even greater through Jesus.

So our responsibility to accept and remain in those is greater. Hear these words of Jesus, you might want to turn if you like to John chapter 15 in your Bibles as we get near the end.

What does Jesus say? John chapter 15 verse 1, I am the true vine. He's picking up language from Jeremiah chapter 2, Jesus is saying, I'm the true Israel.

I'm what Israel was supposed to be. You, my father is the vine dresser. And verse 5, I'm the vine, you are the branches. You are the branches.

[25 : 11] If we trust in Christ, we are branches in him, rooted in him, built into him. What does Jesus go on to say in verse 5 of John 15?

I'm the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, here it is that bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. How do we ensure that we are truly forgiven?

How do we ensure that in our actions we don't dishonour God? How do we ensure that in our attitudes we don't despise God's gracious gifts? We remain in Jesus.

We remain in Jesus. We have his words in him. We trust in him. We do not move from that. We remember his gracious promise that he will never turn away anyone who calls on him. We remember why he came.

The son of man did not come to condemn the world, but to save the world. We remain in Jesus. And as we trust in him, as we remain in him, so we bear fruit, so we are transformed.

[26 : 13] So we do honour God with our lives and are fit for purpose to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. But, listen to how Jesus goes on. Go back to verse 2.

Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit, he, the Father, takes away. Every branch that does not bear fruit, he, the Father, takes away. Or verse 6.

If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. And the branches are gathered, thrown into fire, and burned. So that's the choice we face, isn't it?

Do we abide in Jesus for a life where he works his fruit through us, so that we do honour God in our actions, we do honour him in our attitude, so that we can be, fulfil the purpose for which he saved us, to be a kingdom of priests, showing the world his greatness.

Or do we fail to keep holding on to the gospel, fail to keep trusting in Jesus, fail to have his words remain in us. In which case, what happens? The branches are cut off and thrown into the fire.

[27 : 31] What happened to Israel, it says, is a warning to all of us, not to be complacent, not to accept really the privileges of being God's people, but also remember the purpose.

Not just to remember that God is love, but to remember that he is light. That by his grace we might bear fruit to him and be the kingdom of priests, the holy nation, that he called us to be, that he might declare his excellencies in a needy, broken world.

Let's pray.