

Unrelenting Oppression

Amos 8:4-7

Rev. Philip Parker

February 16, 2025

When I was about thirteen years of age I joined the Boy Scouts. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I learned a lot of things like how to tie knots, how to administer first aid and how to go camping in the woods. Just as importantly I learned some things about how we should treat one another. They are summed up in the Scout Law—a Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent. We could spend the remainder of this morning talking about each of these character traits. They are good rules to live by. They helped me to grow up from a boy into a man. They also taught me the value of being the kind of person who strives to help others instead of taking advantage of them.

Unfortunately, there was a group of people living a long time ago, who didn't want to live by the Scout Law. They didn't observe any of those things that make it easier for us to get along with one another. They were not helpful, friendly, courteous, or kind. In fact, they were just the opposite. They did their best to be hurtful and abusive. They knew better because they were God's people. He had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and He had given them a beautiful land in which to live. He had also given them some rules to live by which would help them to live peacefully and lovingly with one another. These rules are found in the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus, the third book in the Old Testament. Here are a few of the things God said, "Leave a little extra when you harvest your fields for the poor. Don't deceive one another. Don't withhold the wages of those who work for you. Don't pervert justice or show partiality. Don't seek revenge or bear a grudge. Do not use dishonest weights and measures." Summing it all up, God told the Israelites, "Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Centuries later Jesus would quote this same verse of Scripture when asked about the two greatest commandments. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40).

The people to whom Amos was speaking knew what God had said. They were just not listening. In fact, they were determined to do exactly the opposite of what He said. That's why the Lord had sent Amos to preach to them and to warn them that judgement was coming if they persisted in their oppressive behavior. So Amos was not only God's spokesman, he had become God's prosecuting attorney, bringing his case against the people of Israel, especially the wealthy upper class. As the prosecuting attorney his job was to carefully delineate all of the ways that these Israelites had taken

advantage of their neighbors, especially those who were poor and impoverished. The Scripture which was read this morning was like a listing of offenses presented to a jury. Let's review them together.

This is a summary of the charges that Amos brought against them. He said that they trampled the needy and did away with the poor in the following ways. They could hardly wait until the Sabbath was over so they could start selling their goods. When they opened their shops they sold two thirds of a pound of wheat, but charged the customers for a whole pound. They also raised the prices for the things they were selling to secure a greater profit. Today we'd call it price gouging. Additionally merchants used scales that were tilted in their favor. Goods, especially grains and produce were sold by weight. You put the goods you wanted to buy on one side of the scale and the merchant put his weights on the other side until the two sides were in balance with one another. What if the weights were not true, the weight that said one pound was actually only three quarters of a pound, then you would be short changing the customer. That's precisely what was taking place. Furthermore, Amos said that the poor were being bought with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. Here's what was happening. A farmer would get a loan to buy seed to plant a field. If the crop failed or he was cheated when he tried to sell his harvest, he would not have enough money to pay off his debt. First his field, then his possessions and finally even his freedom would be forfeited. Both he and his family would be sold into slavery. Finally, Amos said that sweepings were being sold with wheat. In other words impurities were being added to that which was being marketed as pure. If you purchased five pounds of wheat, a pound of it might be contaminated with dust and dirt left over from the threshing process.

In response, Amos said that the Lord would not forget what they had done. He would respond in such a way that His righteous anger would be released upon the land. Verses nine through fourteen in chapter eight, describe a series of events that would be visited upon the land of Israel from unusual natural phenomenon such as darkened skies at midday to a widespread famine which would hold the country in its iron grip. Worst of all there would be no word of hope or consolation from the Lord. He would not answer their prayers or respond to their cries for help. Mourning and despair would fill the land. It would become a sad scene indeed.

The consequences spelled out in these verses reminds me of an incident that took place in my English class in high school. In the twelfth grade we studied English literature, the writings of the people of Great Britain. Our teacher, who was a loving, but stern disciplinarian, decided to give a young college teacher in training an opportunity to lead the class. She would step next door into the library during that period of instruction. It just so happened that that very day was the four hundredth anniversary of the birth of Shakespeare. So my fellow students decided to throw a party. They took over the classroom, opening snacks that had been brought from home while the student teacher watched the proceedings, both surprised and dismayed

by what was happening. All was going along quite nicely until the door to the library opened and Mrs. Davis stepped across the threshold. The party had gotten a little too noisy and she'd heard what was going on. I'll never forget the look on her face and the sound of her voice. We had been caught red handed and judgement was about to descend upon us from on high. Multiply that by a thousand times over and you'll have some idea of what the Lord had in store for the people of Israel because of the way they had abused and taken advantage of those among them who were not as well off.

So what does all of this have to say to us today. There are several things that I want to call to your attention. First, we have an obligation to care for those in need of help. The Scout Slogan says, "Do a good turn daily." That applies to all of us and it's more than doing nice things for people. It's also treating them nicely. Taking advantage of people, bullying and looking down on others who may look or act a little differently should never become a part of our lives at school, on the job, at home, or even here at church. Instead, we should do just the opposite. We should reach out to them to lift them up just like Jesus did. Over and over again Jesus extended a helping hand to those who were on the lowest rungs of society, like those blind beggars on the road to Jericho who needed to have their sight restored.

Second, helping others is one of the ways we honor God. In the Old Testament there is a book which offers lots of everyday wisdom. It's called Proverbs. Here is what it says about helping others. "He who oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker, but he who is kind to the needy honors God" (Proverbs 14:31). When we help others, it not only honors God, but is also like actually doing something for Him personally. That is what Jesus meant when He talked about addressing the needs of the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely and the sick. He said, "Whatever you do for one of the least of these, you do it unto Me" (Matthew 25:40).

Finally, helping others is a blessing. Not helping them can become just the opposite, a curse. Once again we find this bit of wisdom in the book of Proverbs. "He who gives to the poor will lack nothing, but he who closes his eyes to them receives many curses" (Proverbs 28:27). Blessings and curses come in many shapes and sizes and not always the stuff or lack of stuff in this world. More frequently than not, blessings and curses have to do with our feelings and attitudes about life. Remember old Ebenezer Scrooge in Dicken's A Christmas Carol? What was he like before the three ghosts of Christmas visited him? He may have had lots of money, but he was cursed with a bitter, selfish, lonely, self-centered way of life. He was miserable. But when he opened his heart and his wallet to others, including his impoverished employee, Bob Cratchit, he became a man blessed with an abundance of joy and happiness.

To sum it all up, let us open our hearts to those in need, never seeking to take advantage of them for selfish gain. For in so doing both we and they will be blessed.