

Amos 8:4-7

⁴ Listen to this, you who trample the needy to wipe out the oppressed from the land, ⁵ who say, “When will the New Moon be over so that we can sell grain? When will the Sabbath end so that we can open the grain bins? Then we will make the bushel smaller and make the shekel weight heavier. We will cheat with dishonest scales. ⁶ We will buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. We will sell the chaff with the grain.” ⁷ The LORD swears by the Pride of Jacob, “I will never forget any of their deeds.”

Sermon for Pentecost 19, October 11, 2020 St. Paul’s Green Garden

Text: Amos 8:4-7

Theme: “The Appealing Fruit is Rotten to the Core”

- I. Displayed by a lack of love for fellow human beings
- II. Where there is no love for the neighbor there is no love for God

In the name of Jesus, dear fellow redeemed,

One of the wonderful blessings God has showered on our country is the abundance and availability of fresh fruits and vegetables. At this time of year you can go to super markets or farmers’ markets all over this state and in many cities around the country and you will find displays and refrigerator cases brimming over with ripe fruits of every color, flavor and description—sweet, juicy and appealing. How disappointing it would be if we were to find that absolutely every piece of that fruit was rotten inside. We would probably have a few questions for the store manager.

The prophet Amos had some serious questions for the people of Israel about 750 years before Christ. In chapters 7-9 of his prophecy Amos records 5 visions the Lord showed him. The fourth of those visions is before us today in chapter 8. The Lord showed Amos a basket of ripe summer fruit. Here God used a play on words. The Hebrew word for “summer fruit” is similar in sound and spelling to the Hebrew word that means “end.” So when the Lord asked Amos what he saw and Amos replied, “a basket of summer fruit”, the Lord told him, “**The end has come for my people Israel.**” The fruit that looked shiny, delicious and appealing on the outside was actually rotten to the core. God’s people were ripe for judgment. And it was Amos’s assignment to bring the Lord’s message to these people.

When God brought the Israelites into the land of Canaan under Joshua, the twelve tribes had been one nation. But about 2 centuries before Amos’s time the nation underwent civil strife and split to form two kingdoms. The northern 10

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tribes formed their own kingdom known as Israel or the northern kingdom. That left only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the southern kingdom often simply called “Judah”. The two centuries that followed brought much trouble for the two nations both from outside countries and between themselves. Amos was assigned to prophesy to the Northern Kingdom.

The people of Israel probably thought they didn’t need a prophet of God. Politically things were going quite well for them. After two centuries of strife and poverty they were experiencing a time of prosperity similar to the one under kings David and Solomon. Israel’s near neighbor to the north, Damascus, had been crushed several decades earlier and was no threat to Israel. A succession of weak kings in Assyria meant that there was no threat to Israel from that quarter. The king of Israel at Amos’s time, Jeroboam II, had launched a military campaign and regained territory Israel had lost to Damascus after the time of Solomon.

Materially Israel was also prospering. As she expanded her territory she was able to dominate the trade routes passing through her lands. Increased trade brought increased wealth to the merchant class. It also brought more culture in the form of arts, music and literature. The Israelites developed more expensive tastes as Amos tells us in chapters 5 and 6: **“You have built houses of cut stones... You have planted choice vineyards... [you] lie on ivory beds, sprawling upon their couches, ... improvising tunes on the lyre... composing music for themselves on musical instruments like David... drinking large bowls of wine—they slather themselves with the most expensive perfumed oils.”** Israel’s material and political prosperity was perhaps as great at this time as it had been during Solomon’s reign.

The fruit looked ripe and pleasing on the outside but inside it was rotten. Amos chides the wealthy classes of the northern kingdom because they were rotten in the treatment of their fellow human beings. They were merciless in their treatment of the poor. The rich merchants didn’t care what they had to do to make a buck. If it meant resorting to less than ethical means to make money so be it. Listen to their tactics: **Listen to this, you who trample the needy to wipe out the oppressed from the land, ... Who say, then we will make the bushel smaller and make the shekel weight heavier. We will cheat with dishonest scales. ⁶ We will buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. We will sell the chaff with the grain.”**

Amos made some harsh and condemning accusations against the wealthy in Israel. Merchants were in the habit of using dishonest measures. For instance, the main unit of measuring dry goods was was equivalent to about ½ a bushel known as an ephah. But when someone came to buy an ephah of grain the merchants used a measure that was less than a full ephah. You can see that the merchant would

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clearly be selling less than a full measure for the price of a full measure. But they didn't stop there in their disregard for the poor. Payment for goods was made in silver, not in coin but by weight. The main unit of weight was the shekel. It was measured on a balance scale, ordinarily against a standard shekel weight. But the heartless merchant could boost the price simply by using a weight heavier than the standard shekel. It would take more silver than a shekel to balance the scale. In that way the poor were fleeced out of even more of their money. At other times merchants purposely altered their scales to cheat customers. They would even stoop to selling the chaff with the grain to increase its volume while decreasing the value of the product.

Amos' indictment wasn't finished. This fruit is truly rotten to the core. If the poor couldn't pay their debts even a debt as small as that for a pair of sandals, the rich creditor might easily sell the debtor into slavery for his failure to pay even if he were unable. Amos' made his point. This fruit is rotten, rotten in their treatment of their fellow human beings.

We could be appalled. We could gasp in horror. But let's set aside our emotional reaction for a moment. Let's refrain from asking, "How could they?" That specific society and culture are gone. But God's message is still here in 2020. It is a message meant for us. We may look like bright shiny Christians on the outside, but there is a lot of rottenness and decay in our hearts.

We may not oppress our fellow human beings in quite the same way as those merchants of north Israel but we oppress them in other ways. We look down our noses at certain races or classes because they are poor. At times don't we stereotype them and call them wasteful and shiftless. We shun people who aren't clean or aren't wearing the right kind of clothes. In his letter to the early Christians James gives an example that convicts all of us: "**Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?**" It is one thing to know about someone else's need and quite another to meet his need. We each must confess we are guilty of standing by while others are in need and we could have helped but didn't. That is rotten. But it is like a breath of pure air to know that Jesus Christ never oppressed one anyone because they were poor. He never once demanded payment for healing someone of leprosy or blindness or any other illness. His compassion never failed. Nor did his determination to go to the cross, to carry our rotten sins with him and pay for them with his life as if they were his very own. Jesus cured our rottenness.

You and I simply cannot cure ourselves of the rottenness of our sinful nature. Many Israelites of Amos's time not only didn't keep that in mind, they didn't care

about it at all. Their greed and desire for more wealth and pretty possessions crowded love right out of their hearts. Their rottenness displayed itself in their treatment of their fellow human beings. When there is no love for ones neighbor, there is no love for God either.

A quick check on Israel's past gives us a good picture of their rottenness toward God. Throughout their history they had followed ruinous false worship. The Lord had made it clear that he wanted his people, to whom he promised the Savior, to worship him at his temple in Jerusalem. But at the time the kingdom divided, King Jeroboam I didn't want his subjects going down to Jerusalem to worship. So he set up two unauthorized worship centers with calf images at both, one in the north and one in the south to make their new worship convenient. Later some of the kings made half-hearted attempts at reform. While a reforming king may have wanted the people to worship the Lord, in most cases the people continued to worship at the false altars. They claimed they were worshipping the true God but it wasn't so. Through Amos the Lord made it clear: **“Go to Bethel and rebel. Rebel even more at Gilgal. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every third day. Burn some unleavened bread as a thank offering, and proclaim voluntary offerings—announce them! For you love to do this you people of Israel”, says the LORD God.”**

It becomes clear from the Lord's angry words here that the people of Israel had not repented of their sins in any way. Their lives were certainly not focused in keeping the Lord's commands. They were so eager to keep the profits coming in they couldn't wait for God's prescribed worship days to end. They said, **“When will the New Moon be over so that we can sell grain? When will the Sabbath end so that we can open the grain bins?”** They looked upon the practice of their religion as an inconvenience since they would have to stop their merchandising and selling in order to observe religious days and festivals. It is easy to see that their minds were not on the promises God had made in connection with these festivals. They couldn't wait for the Sabbath “no work” day to end so they could get back to fattening their bank accounts. Their SUNDays became SINDays. An unrepentant heart breeds only love of self, not love for God.

The LORD's anger toward them makes it clear that the majority had not repented: **The LORD swears by the Pride of Jacob, “I will never forget any of their deeds.”** God's anger is evident. He took an oath to never forget how his ungrateful people had wiped their feet on his mercy and trampled his love for them. When God swears by the pride of Jacob, it probably means he is swearing by Himself. For earlier in chapter 4 and again in chapter 6 the Lord swears by himself and his holiness.

His promise to never forget how his people had spit in his face certainly implies that he will punish them for all their sins and their lack of repentance. In chapter 9 the message becomes ever so clear. Amos writes: **“I saw the Lord standing by the altar, and he said: “Strike the capitals on top of the pillars so that the thresholds shake. Cut them off so that they fall on the heads of all the people, and those who survive I will kill with the sword. No one who flees from there will get away, and not a single fugitive from among them will escape. ... Look, the eyes of the Lord God are on the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the face of the earth.”** All this came true in 722 B.C. when the powerful Assyrian war machine mowed them down and carried the survivors of the northern kingdom into captivity. They were never allowed to return to their homeland.

The warning here is a solemn one for us as well. Have our **Sundays** become **Sindays**? Perhaps not in such a readily observable way. But remember that many Israelites at Amos’ time claimed to worship God but in their hearts worshiped idols. What is our attitude toward the opportunities we have to hear God’s Word? Do we come to church with the attitude of just getting it over with. During this pandemic, even if we are worshiping from home, do we put off worship, or just do it as quickly as we can so we can get it over with and get to all the pressing and urgent things that need to be done? Is hearing God’s Word such an inconvenience that we can remove it from our Sunday schedule if we have the opportunity to do something we consider more enjoyable? Has work and earning a living become more important than our relationship with God and his Son, Jesus Christ?

Yes, God gave us his word so we could have a relationship with him; so we could hear his promises and find healing for the rottenness residing in each of our hearts; so we could have the comfort of sins forgiven, washed clean and the reality of a new life as clean as brand new linen. This is what God has freely given us with no strings attached. You don’t ever have to remain in the rottenness of your sins. In Christ Jesus you are not rotten fruit, you are a wholesome, redeemed child of God without spot, blemish or stain. The Savior has given you a clean heart and daily he promises to renew a right spirit within you. Believe this truth and live joyfully in his love for you. Amen.