

What Gets God Angry with his People

Amos 2:4-16

The challenge in applying this passage today is that few of us individually have the money, power, and position to exploit or abuse the poor directly. Yet as a prosperous class within in American society, and as a powerful economy within this world, arguably we are beneficiaries of an economic system that exploits others.

Economic segregation provides us opportunity for better education leading to higher-paid jobs, while excluding others of lower income residing in poorer towns. Our jobs provide sufficient income to afford luxuries, while urban unemployment rates entrench poverty. International agribusiness and manufacturing enable us to buy unprecedented amounts of foods and goods at incredibly low prices, while leaving those who produce the products – and those in the U.S. who lost their jobs through outsourcing – in grinding poverty.

In other words, we may not individually engage in the sins of Israel's wealthy and powerful class. Exploitation today may be more commonly systemic, rather than individual, and indirect rather than intentional. So application is harder to implement, but this may not absolve us from guilt or free us from obligation to redress the situation.

This week we consider the accusations against Israel to ask how and to whom they may apply today. It is not enough that we individually be innocent of these sins: Amos also condemns the society where such sin flourishes. So we give thought to both individual and systemic applications.

Day One: Amos 2:6b

They sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

These victims are 'righteous' in the basic sense that they have not violated Old Testament Law; they have simply fallen into poverty and debt. Those who loaned them money – even amounts small enough to buy a pair of shoes – recouped their losses by forcing debtors into slavery.

Recently, a great many people have lost their homes through foreclosure, even at the same time as the federal government bails out large banks. Pray for President Obama's economic advisors as they take up the responsibility of grabbling not just with a fracturing financial system, but also with the predicament of rank-and-file poor.

Day Two: Amos 2:7a

They trample the heads of the poor into the dust of the earth, and impede the progress of the oppressed.

The rich in Amos' time 'stepped on' the poor to gain personal profit, and obstructed any attempts the poor made to get ahead. Similarly, one of the contributing factors to the recent meltdown in the housing market was unscrupulous brokers taking advantage of the unregulated mortgage industry to make loans to people who had little hope of paying them off, especially once their adjustable rates reset or their payments ballooned.

As a welcome contrast, this past Wednesday, the Globe reported the unusual case of Maximilien Yelbi, a homeless immigrant from Côte d'Ivoire (via France), who stayed at the student-run Harvard Square Homeless Shelter while studying at a local community college. There four undergraduates helped him pursue admission at a ranked four-year college, where he received a full scholarship.

Pray for those in our church who serve at homeless shelters, or in other ministries helping the disenfranchised. Consider joining them, if you are not already fully engaged in other ministry.

Day Three: Amos 2:7b

Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name.

The context focuses on taking advantage of the poor, so likely something worse is happening than simply father and son violating the Old Testament prohibition against successively marrying the same woman (Deut 22:30).

Throughout the ages, the sex trade has been a frequent means of survival for desperately poor or broken people, who are more

sinned against than sinners. Throughout the ages also, predators in positions of power – whether slave owners or employers – have opportunity to abuse their positions and those dependent on them.

If you are in a position of authority, use today to examine your life for any hints of sexual harassment in the workplace. If you are a user of the sex trade – from pornography to prostitution – today confess that sin to God and to identify a trustworthy group of friends who can hold you accountable. Pray also for those who entered the sex trade in order to survive on the streets.

Day Four: Amos 2:8

They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines.

These abusers of the poor were not atheists. Instead, they considered themselves devout. They regularly gave offerings at the altars; they regularly worshipped at the shrines.

But even in this, they abused the poor. The poor might have nothing else to give as collateral, apart from their warm outer coat. The Old Testament law allows the lender to take it, but only for the day, and requires him to return it at night for use as a blanket. Instead, the lender keeps the coat, and wears it to worship.

Similarly, judges fine the poor in court, and then confiscate the fines for their own use, even for religious celebrations in the presence of God. No amount of worship, no abundance of offerings, can appease his anger over abuse of the poor.

Pray that your – our, even American – worship may be acceptable to God. That we may not be guilty of exploiting the poor, on the one hand, and expecting mercy from God, on the other.

Day Five: Amos 2:9

I destroyed the Amorite before them, though he was as tall as the cedars and strong as the oaks. I destroyed his fruit above and his roots below.

God reminds the Israelites of his intervention on their behalf when they were helpless in the face of oppression. Yet instead of intervening on behalf of the helpless, they have become oppressors.

Thank God for his intervention that delivered you from sin and Satan. Ask God to show you ways that you can help deliver others from poverty and helplessness.

Day Six: Amos 2:10-12

I brought you up out of Egypt, and I led you forty years in the desert...I also raised up prophets from among your sons and Nazirites from among your young men...But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets not to prophesy.

God gave Israel the Law (Torah), and he sent them Nazirites to lead them, and prophets to rebuke them when they strayed into sin. But Israel disregarded God's instruction and his warning.

God has also given us his Word, with its warnings against abusing the poor, and its injunctions to care for the helpless. Consider whether you individually – or we corporately – have disregarded God's Word through negligence in caring for the poor, and what steps you/we might take to redress that neglect.

Day Seven: Amos 2:13-16

Now then, I will crush you as a cart crushes when loaded with grain. [Not even the powerful] will escape.

Notably, God earlier condemned Damascus for brutality in war against Israel. Now he himself threatens brutality against Israel for their abuse of the poor.

Pray for yourself, our country, and the church in America, that we might not become so self-indulgent in our affluence, that we bring divine judgment on ourselves. Eschewing guilt and fear, pray for our church leadership, our social concerns committee, and for yourself, for a sense of what we might do to influence any systemic exploitation of the poor, and to care concretely for the helpless.