

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

Bad Religion

Anniversary Sunday

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Amos

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Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to the Book of Amos. I mentioned last week that Hosea, Joel and Amos are generally viewed together and that they function in a complementary way within the Biblical canon. There is a lot overlap between these three books but then each book adds something distinctive and it is that distinctive contribution in Amos that I want to draw your attention to this morning. Of these three books, Amos paints the most detailed and comprehensive portrait of the type of bad religion that summons the wrath of God. As we will see this morning there is good religion and there is BAD religion and it is very important for God's people to know the difference between the two. Open your Bibles to Amos 2:4.

A Portrait Of Bad Religion:

⁴Thus says the LORD:

*“For three transgressions of Judah, and for four,
I will not turn away its *punishment*,
Because they have despised the law of the LORD,*

And have not kept His commandments.
Their lies lead them astray,
Lies which their fathers followed. (Amos 2:4. NKJV)

Had you been hearing Amos deliver these oracles live, this would have been the verse where you began to be offended. Generally speaking, God's people enjoy a good, rousing denunciation of sinful pagans and that is exactly how Amos begins in chapter 1. He talks about the wrath of God in store for the nations and everyone is getting jazzed. Bring it son! Preach it brother! But then Amos throws them a curveball. Not only will God punish the pagans for their unbelief he will also and primarily punish his own people for their faulty belief. For three transgressions and for four I will punish JUDAH! Amos delivered this message in Northern Israel about 150 years after the division of the Jewish people into two kingdoms, north and south. The south, Judah, was generally viewed as being more religious than the north, so in contemporary terms this would be like a prophet in Times Square New York City saying to a crowd: "For three transgressions and for four I will punish the Bible Belt!" If God is going to punish the Bible belt that you can bet he will be coming for us next. Specifically Amos says that God is rejecting the religion of his people because of their lawlessness and self deception.

1. A religion of lawlessness and self deception

You have not kept His commandments, Amos says, and you have chosen instead to be deceived. Notice that the prophet calls these deceptions the "lies which their fathers followed". One of the things you notice if you read the Bible and study a little church history is that certain heresies just keep coming back around in every generation, particularly within certain circles. There is nothing new under the sun. Certain people seem to love certain ditches and they seem to be drawn to those ditches like a moth to a flame. Specifically the prophet here mentions the heresy of lawlessness or what theologians call "antinomianism". One of the dangers of being a people who talk all the time about being saved by grace is that in every generation some knucklehead of a preacher runs out of his harness and starts teaching that since we are saved by grace, any effort to hold people accountable to the law of God must be legalism. And the people eat it up because that is exactly what they want to believe. People want to believe that God is a big dopey grandfather who just wants to give you candy, so go ahead and sin, it will come out in the wash, God loves us. That is a heresy and it is a heresy you fall into when you stop loving the word of God. The Bible is not unclear on this issue. Jesus said:

²¹“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven....²³ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’ (Matthew 7:21-23. NKJV)

The word translated there as “you who practice lawlessness” is the Greek *anomia* which means “the against the law people”. Jesus literally says: “The antinomians go to hell. They are not saved. I do not know them.” That is remarkably clear and yet this heresy comes up again and again and again. People want to think that the grace of God means that the commandments of God do not have to be kept. That is not what it means and God could not have been more clear about that. Jesus said:

¹⁵“If you love Me, keep My commandments. (John 14:15. NKJV)

You don’t have to have been to seminary to understand that. Good religion obviously means that we respond to the love and mercy of God with obedience. Bad religion is when we do not. Bad religion is also:

2. A religion devoid of social or moral implication

Look at Amos 2:6-7, now he’s talking to the northern kingdom:

“For three transgressions of Israel, and for four,
I will not turn away its *punishment*,
Because they sell the righteous for silver,
And the poor for a pair of sandals.
⁷ They [£]pant after the dust of the earth *which is* on the head of the poor,
And pervert the way of the humble.
A man and his father go in to the *same* girl,
To defile My holy name. (Amos 2:6-7. NKJV)

God’s people despise the poor and practice perversion. All they care about is sex and money, the prophet says and they don’t care who they have to victimize in order to get it. And the worst part of it is, these people, these disgusting, greedy, cruel people – they love to go to church! Look at Amos 4:4-5:

⁴ “Come to Bethel and transgress,
At Gilgal multiply transgression;
Bring your sacrifices every morning,

Your tithes every three [£]days.

⁵ Offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving with leaven,
Proclaim *and* announce the freewill offerings;
For this you love,
You children of Israel!”
Says the Lord GOD. (Amos 4:4-5. NKJV)

You guys love to come to church! You are actually pretty decent tithers. You sing really well. You love church! And yet you are greedy, nasty, perverts. How can this be? Well my guess is that #2 has a lot to do with #1. When God’s people stop loving God’s law it becomes very easy to construct a religious system that encourages us to worship the Lord while we live in sin. Listen, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to see the contemporary application of this does it? I have lived the contemporary application of this. I grew up in the Evangelical church but somehow managed to miss the whole “hate sin” piece. Deep into my 20’s I loved God, loved church and also loved sin. I’ve been in this place and that is why I hate this place. I hate any talk about Christianity that leaves out the need for us to HATE SIN. That little missing piece of information nearly ruined my life. The prophet hammers them for this omission:

¹⁵ Hate evil, love good;
Establish justice in the gate. (Amos 5:15. NKJV)

There have to be moral and social implications for the Gospel or it is a lie and worse than a lie it is a curse upon the earth. If Christianity is just about escaping hell than it is repugnant and we should all abandon it to the dustbin of history. If we hide in our closets and pray for the rapture while the world goes to hell in a hand basket than we deserve the wrath of God and it would be a mercy to the world if were taken away. The name of Christ is blasphemed among the nations because of so called Christians who think they are saved, who come to church and raise their hands and cry and sob and dance for joy but who then go back out to the streets and back to their sin and their debauchery all the while trusting in the grace of Christ for their forgiveness. This isn’t theory, this is FBC last week! As a pastor I have these conversations with people. I share Christ with someone and they say to me: “Why should I have to repent of my sins? I know so and so from your church and yet I run into them every time I visit my drug dealer. Why do you say that I can’t love Jesus and do drugs if the members of your church do it?” That is a real conversation friends with very little in the way of generalization. There are members of this church who call themselves Christians, who carry the name of Christ into this community but for whom there are apparently NO SOCIAL OR MORAL IMPLICATIONS to the Gospel. They are

the greatest enemy for the cause of evangelism in this city. Leave all the demons and take those people away and the Gospel would be better off. A Christianity with no moral or social implications is the greatest enemy of true religion in this city. Thirdly, the prophet says that bad religion is:

3. A religion of forgetfulness and ingratitude

Look at 2:9-11:

- ⁹ “Yet *it was I who* destroyed the Amorite before them,
Whose height *was* like the height of the cedars,
And he *was as* strong as the oaks;
Yet I destroyed his fruit above
And his roots beneath.
- ¹⁰ Also *it was I who* brought you up from the land of Egypt,
And led you forty years through the wilderness,
To possess the land of the Amorite.
- ¹¹ I raised up some of your sons as prophets,
And some of your young men as Nazirites.
Is it not so, O you children of Israel?”
Says the LORD. (Amos 2:9-11. NKJV)

There are two things that these people have forgotten: they’ve forgotten the historic acts of their redemption and they’ve forgotten the specific works of God’s favour and kindness in their midst. In the Old Testament the specific acts of redemption and salvation were the acts of the Exodus. God sent the plagues, defeated the Egyptians, parted the Red Sea etc. These people forgot those things. They stopped rehearsing the acts of their redemption. In today’s terms we would say they stopped preaching the cross. They stopped doing communion in the services. When we do communion what do we say? Do this in remembrance of me. God knows that we forget so by his grace he has given us means of remembrance. We need to rehearse those things and we must never tire of so doing.

These people have also forgotten the specific works of kindness that God has done for them. God raised up some of their own sons to be prophets and consecrated some of their own young people unto special holiness and dedication. Do you understand that good leaders are a gift from God? Do you understand that young men who want to study for the ministry are a sign of God’s favour on your church? Right now we have two young men studying for the ministry who were saved and raised in this church, Ryan Shevalier and Jesse Stewart. We also heard a few weeks

ago from three younger men who have started their preparation, Braden Smith, Joel Cross and Luke Davison. That has to be understood as a sign of God's grace and favour upon this house. In addition God is stirring up our young boys and girls to stand for Jesus Christ and to be set apart from this destructive culture. A number of our teenagers are taking a bold stand for Jesus Christ in their high schools. Just last week I heard about Sam Cowan and Josh Yorke who were given an assignment at OD to write a paper about the most important thing in their life and to present that to their peers. Both of them wrote about their walk with Jesus Christ. They are separating themselves and consecrating themselves unto the Lord. The prophet says that the fact that God does this in our young people is supposed to be celebrated and cherished and **REMEMBERED!**

Listen to me church, today above all days, we need to remember that God has favoured us by sending us true leaders. This church is unusual in that it has been saved, by and large from the two major ditches that Baptists tend to fall into. Baptists historically have struggled to avoid two heresies: liberalism and Hyper-Calvinism and we tend to veer from one ditch to the other like drunken sailors on payday but this church, FBC, Orillia has largely avoided those ditches over the last 100 years and everybody I've talked to has said that it was because of two men, humanly speaking. Ray LeDrew and Norm Baird. The centre-rootedness of these two men, in the gracious Providence of God saved us from the two ditches which swallowed and destroyed most of the other churches in our denomination. Pastor LeDrew saved us from liberalism and Pastor Baird from Hyper-Calvinism – they were God's gift to us in our hour of need. Bad churches forget things like that but good churches remember. Fools repeat their history but wise men and women learn from it¹.

Listen to me friends, if you ever find yourself in a church that has no history or that has no one over 80 who can remember anything that happened before last summer you need to get out. Fast. Everybody my age in ministry wants to plant a new church. Church planting is sexy they tell me. They tell me that it is the way to go because you don't have to negotiate with old people or deal with history and tradition. It's a clean slate. It's like nitro – you can go so much faster and get so

¹ I have the incredible blessing of living on the same street as Pastor Norm. When I go over to Pastor Norm's house I tell Susan not to book me any other appointments that day because we are going long; it's going to be 2 hours minimum. I sit down and I prepare to absorb. I can't do that with Pastor Ray, because he's passed away. So I've been e-mailing his grandson and he's been sending me sermons and sharing memories because these are the men that God used in the past to keep us on the right path and we need to remember them and learn from them.

much more done. There is some truth in that. You can go faster if you jettison history and get rid of all your old people. You can go faster and you can die quicker when you hit the wall at mock speed. Having no history and no historical memory is like driving without breaks. Yes you can go faster but you will not make the turns. Everything is new for such people and you are not smart enough to navigate at that speed. Bad religion has no memory and lacks a thankful spirit for past blessings, good religion remembers, learns and gives thanks. Fourthly, bad religion is:

4. A religion of laxity and intransigence

Look at 2:12:

¹² “But you gave the Nazirites wine to drink,
And commanded the prophets saying,
‘Do not prophesy!’ (Amos 2:12. NKJV)

A Nazarite was someone who took a special vow to consecrate themselves to God for special service. John The Baptist was a Nazarite – do you remember he ate locusts and honey and wore a camel hair shirt? Nazarites lived well within their liberty – well inside the outer limit of the law. They hungered and thirsted for God and they lost their taste for the things of this earth. But, the prophet says, you were intimidated by these people; you felt judged and so you made them drink wine, you made them live at the limit of their liberty so that you would feel validated in your own moral license. You made moral laxity a sign of maturity and you came to despise sacrifice and purity. My friends I have to tell you that this is my concern with a lot of the emergent churches. They talk so much about relevance and so much about liberty that it seems like they are in danger of losing their saltiness. Worse than that they place new believers at risk because it is one thing for a 40 year old pastor to boast about his home brewing skills but if a 19 year old convert tries to follow that example there may be disastrous consequences. I love Mark Driscol. He is on our team. Our young people and teenagers should download his talks. But. This is where I have to respectfully disagree with him. Driscol at times makes drinking beer and making your own wine a mark of spiritual maturity but we used to think that forgoing those permissible things so as to reach as many as we can and so as to safeguard the faith of weaker brethren was the mark of spiritual maturity; what happened? It is a mark of bad religion, not good religion when we compel people to live at the limit of their liberty.

It is also a mark of bad religion when we tell the prophets and the preachers to shut their mouths and to tickle our ears. The word “intransigent” means to refuse to listen and to refuse to be taught. I couldn’t think of a more commonly used word so I figured I would just define that one. Bad religion is marked by a desire for short sermons and ear tickling messages that don’t convict the heart. The Apostle Paul talked about this:

³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; ⁴and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. (2 Timothy 4:3-4. NKJV)

In bad churches they complain that the sermons are too long and filled with too much doctrine. They ask for funny sermons on contemporary topics filled with video clips and there are plenty of pastors who will give them what they want. In good churches they learn to sit and to listen and to hunger for God’s word. Lastly in terms of this portrait of bad religion, Amos says that bad religion is:

5. A religion of false hope and false security

Look at 5:18:

Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD!
For what good *is* the day of the LORD to you?
It *will be* darkness, and not light. (Amos 5:18. NKJV)

People in Amos’ day longed for the Day of the Lord because they assumed it would be a happy day, a day of escape from the troubles of day to day life. Amos rebukes them and says: “What Bible are you reading? Why in the world would you think that if the Holy God of the universe showed up he would do anything but slay you in his wrath?” The people of Israel were delusional. They were filled with false hopes. We see this today in the rapture crowd that thinks that Jesus is going to come for them and beam them up into heaven so that his good little Christians never have to suffer. If you press them they will admit that this is nowhere taught in the Bible but they will say, it is a reasonable inference based on the fact that God loves us and would never allow us to suffer. And if Amos were here he would rebuke them and ask them: “What Bible are you reading from?” Does not the Word of God say:

³ The refining pot *is* for silver and the furnace for gold,
But the LORD tests the hearts. (Proverbs 17:3. NKJV)

The Teacher says: “What is the refining pot for except to refine silver? What is the furnace for except to separate gold from lesser metals. What do you expect from God except that he would do the same to us?” God uses fire and furnace to refine and purify his people. If you worship a God who loves you too much to submit you to that process, you love a God that is not the God of the Bible. You are delusional and you are trusting in a fantasy.

Bad religion is also full of misplaced security. Look at 6:1-6.

¹ Woe to you *who are* at ease in Zion,
And trust in Mount Samaria...
² Go over to Calneh and see;
And from there go to Hamath the great;
Then go down to Gath of the Philistines.
Are you better than these kingdoms?
Or is their territory greater than your territory?
³ *Woe to* you who put far off the day of doom,
Who cause the seat of violence to come near;
⁴ Who lie on beds of ivory,
Stretch out on your couches,
Eat lambs from the flock
And calves from the midst of the stall;
⁵ Who sing idly to the sound of stringed instruments,
And invent for yourselves musical instruments like David;
⁶ Who drink wine from bowls,
And anoint yourselves with the best ointments,
But are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph. (Amos 6:1-6. NKJV)

“You are so certain that you are in”, says the prophet, “but upon what basis do you have such confidence? You are no different than the pagans you live among! I see no evidence of salvation! You are not worried about the wrath of God, you live for luxury and self indulgence, you delight in prosperity and you do not sorrow over sin! How can you be so sure that you are saved?” My friends, these words could have been written yesterday! So many Christians today are so sure that they are saved. God is love, they tell us, I said a little prayer, they remind us and yet they look no different than the pagans. They live for money, their god is their belly and they treat sin and wrath as though they are distasteful relics of a by-gone era. If you talk about sin and the holiness of God and if you believe in hell and eternal punishment they sniff at you and behind your back they call you the Christian Taliban. Lighten up they say. But Jesus said:

⁴ Blessed *are* those who mourn,
For they shall be comforted. (Matthew 5:4. NKJV)

Blessed are those who see and understand the horror of sin. Blessed are those who understand that hell is not a joke or a ghost story intended to scare little kids into saying the sinners' prayer. Blessed are those who have come to realize that all the so called pleasures of the flesh are just so many honey traps meant to ensnare and kill the foolish. Blessed are those who mourn and grieve over sin. For they shall be comforted. Bad religion breeds false security like maggots in meat. People are at ease. People are sure. But they are wrong. Many are those who will mourn their false security on that day, says Jesus.

²²**Many** will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' ²³And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' (Matthew 7:22-23. NKJV)

Bad religion is no small problem says the prophet. It destroys true religion, it decimates the flock, it corrupts the young, it abuses the poor and it summons the wrath of God. Only a fool treats it lightly.

God's Response To Bad Religion:

I told you off the top that my overview of Amos would be heavy on his distinctive contribution and light on the areas of overlap with Hosea and Joel. Briefly then in terms of how God responds to bad religion we see that God responds in Amos just as he does in those two other books. He responds with:

- 1. Rebuke**
- 2. Chastisement**
- 3. Assessment**

He sends a prophet. The prophet points his finger and says: "Thus saith the Lord!" If they don't listen to the prophet, they get plagues and chastisements. Amos actually lists these in chapter 4. He says: "I sent you famine, but you didn't repent. I sent you localized droughts, but you ignored them. I sent you locusts but you didn't repent. I sent you illness and plagues and you didn't

respond. I sent you wars and took the lives of your young people and yet you did not return to me. I laid whole cities low and you shrugged your shoulders. Therefore, he says in 4:12:

“Prepare to meet your God” (Amos 4:12. NKJV)

When people do not respond to rebuke and chastisement and God measures them and finds them unrepentant there is a dramatic escalation, just as promised in Joel.

4. Withdrawal (8:11-12)

5. Antagonism (9:4)

I will set My eyes on them for harm and not for good. (Amos 9:4. NKJV)

6. Destruction (9:8)

“Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD *are* on the sinful kingdom,
And I will destroy it from the face of the earth (Amos 9:8. NKJV)

Ultimately, if God’s so called covenant people do not respond to rebuke, chastisement – if he assesses them and he finds them unrepentant, if they don’t even notice his absence or his antagonism ultimately there is only destruction and wrath. Is that a little too Old Testament for you? Well the New Testament says exactly the same thing:

²⁶For if we wilfully persist in sin after having received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. (Hebrews 10:26-27. NRSV)

Bad religion that is ultimately unrepented of meets the same end in the New Testament that it does in the Old. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Conclusion: A Call For Right Religion

How then shall we live? It’s like we find ourselves in a long hallway and all of these side doors have just slammed in our face. We mustn’t go this way into lawlessness and self deception, we mustn’t go this way into privatism and social apathy, we mustn’t go this way into forgetfulness

and narcissism, we mustn't go this way into compromise and intransigence and we mustn't go this way into delusional hope and false security. All those doors are shut. They are not the right way to respond to the saving acts of God. So how do we respond? Not responding is not an option. Silly people will say: "If bad religion is so bad, perhaps we should be irreligious!" But religion is simply how we respond to God and not responding to God is not an option. If you love me keep my commandments. Be holy as I am holy. Response is mandatory! So how do we respond? With all of these doors closed to us there is really only one way forward. James 1:27 says:

²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27. NRSV)

The right way to respond to the saving acts of God – whether we're talking about the exodus in the Old Testament or the grace of God in Jesus Christ in the New Testament - is with morality and mercy. Be pure and undefiled. Keep my commandments, Jesus says. And be merciful. Build a community of love and mercy that is deepest in here and overflows out there - it is just that simple! Morality and mercy - not as a means of salvation - but as a response to salvation! Holy and loving, moral and merciful. For our good and for His glory. This is right religion. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.