

Stop Playing at Meetings

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[0 : 00] I was pleased to hear that Peter said this was only the third difficult chapter in Amos because I was pretty convinced that the last four have been pretty challenging and tonight I think is the toughest. So we're in chapter 5 and we're with Amos, who is a southern prophet from Tekoa, which is down in the southeast near Bethlehem.

And he's gone north. He's preaching to Israel. He is in every sense of the word a missionary who has crossed cultural lines in order to bring God's word to bear on a local population. It is about 760 BC. And as Amos is preaching, the God of the universe is roaring at Israel in judgment.

Now week one we learned that there was a combination that unlocked Amos for us. Can anyone remember how we get into Amos? It's encouraging.

8351, brilliant. 8351. And we start with eight oracles of judgment. Six are to the surrounding enemies of Israel.

[1 : 13] And God is basically judging them for what in effect are war crimes. Massacring people and performing heinous acts. The seventh oracle of judgment is to Judah.

And God is judging Judah for their disobedience, that they have God's law, and yet they've decided to trample over it and disobey anyway. At this point, Israel is loving Amos until we get to verse 6 of chapter 2, at which point God's cross has turned on Israel themselves.

And it's a catalogue of enormous problems. The two main ones being hypocritical worship and social injustice. They're not loving God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength.

In fact, they're hardly loving him at all and just keeping up appearances. And at the same time, they're trampling over the poor in Israel. We then get three sermons of rebuke.

And this is the third one we're in tonight. We started with Mike in chapter 3. And it was a very bleak chapter. It was a very bleak chapter indeed. But there was one ray of hope where God speaks about his remnants.

[2 : 29] And I think he speaks about it in rather peculiar terms in verse 12. This is what the Lord says. As a shepherd rescues from the lion's mouth only two leg bones or a piece of an ear.

That's what he's saying about the remnant. Just there's a little bit left that God is going to preserve and rescue. And then last week in chapter 4 with Ian, we had this wonderful sermon that was giving us a real way into chapter 4.

And again, it was another bleak chapter. But we did see God's fatherly heart disciplining Israel in order to get their attention. He talks about all the ways in the past that God had tried to get his people to return to him.

And yet they would not come. And so after the three sermons of rebuke, we get five visions of judgment, which we'll start next week with Graham.

And then we get one oracle of salvation. And I have to say, Amos is tough going. It is tough, tough going.

[3 : 34] In fact, it's a bit like being a child on a long car journey. And every mile, you ask your parents, are we there yet? And the parents go, we're not there yet.

In fact, we're not going to be there for quite a while. It was like when I used to drive down to Bournemouth, where I lived from Aberdeen. And you get below Birmingham and you think we're nearly there. You're not nearly there.

It just gets busier and the roads get more boring. Until you finally arrive in Bournemouth, which is a wonderful place to live. And so every week from going through five and then six and then seven and then eight, we're going to go, are we there yet?

And the answer will be no, but we will get there in the end. We will get to the end of chapter nine. And I promise it will be worth it. And if it isn't, Neal will give you a full refund for all the sermons that you turned up to.

And so we come to this, which is the third sermon that Amos has preached. It's kind of like the story of the new preacher who went to a new church and he stood on the pulpit on his first Sunday and said, please could you open your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter two, verse 12.

[4 : 48] He read, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits. The congregation were absolutely spellbound.

They greeted him at the door with warm handshakes, saying how much they've been utterly edified by his teaching that morning. The next Sunday he gets up and he says, please would you turn in your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter two, verse 12, live such good lives among the pagans that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits.

Everyone looks a bit permused, but they're greatly edified by his teaching and greet him warmly at the door afterwards. Week three, he says, please open your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter two, verse 12.

People start to look concerned. And then week four, please open your Bibles to 1 Peter chapter two, verse 12. Finally, one of the women in the congregation grabs him at the door and says, thank you for your teaching, but is there more in our Bibles than 1 Peter chapter two, verse 12?

You seem to be preaching that every week. To which he said, my dear sister, I'll keep preaching it until you start doing it. And then we'll move on to the rest of the Bible.

[6 : 01] That's kind of like what Amos is doing. The three sermons are in fact very, very similar. He is chastising God's people, Israel, for their hypocritical worship and their social injustice.

He's holding those two up again and again and again. And he's going to keep preaching it until Israel do something about it. And so in chapter three, God is roaring.

And in chapter four, God is roaring as Amos preaches, tells the people where they're going wrong. But in chapter five, the tone changes remarkably.

And we move from God roaring at his people to almost like Amos conducting Israel's funeral. It's almost like we've got a picture of what it will look like.

It seems to be a little bit too late. We're getting out of a window into Israel's future funeral with Amos standing at the front of the chapel, giving the eulogy.

[7 : 12] Let's read the first three verses. Hear this word, Israel. This lament I take up concerning you fallen is virgin Israel, never to rise again, deserted in her own land with no one to lift her up.

This is what the sovereign Lord says to Israel. Your city that marches out a thousand strong will have only a hundred left. Your town that marches out a hundred strong will have only ten left.

There's been a death in Israel and Israel has died. And it's been reduced to about a tenth. That it seems that as Amos stands and speaks, the lament pours out of his mouth.

And I guess it's very similar to when Jesus speaks in Luke 19 verses 41 to 44. So he approached Jerusalem and saw the city. He wept over it and said, If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace.

But now it is hidden from your eyes, the days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls.

[8 : 35] They will not leave one stone on another because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you. It's that same idea that it's too late.

That's really where we're coming to in Amos chapter 5. And Amos chapter 5 is the very center of the book. And if you write Hebrew, which I'm sure all of you do, you put the most important thing right in the middle of your book.

So though this is the third sermon he's preached, this is the very knob of everything that Amos is about. And it's long, but I want us to see six key themes.

And hopefully this will just give us a framework if we go back and look at Amos in the week. So the first thing we see is that sin is catalogued. Let me read verses 4 to 6, 7 and 10 and 12.

This is what the Lord says to Israel. Seek me and live. Do not seek Bethel. Do not go to Gilgal. Do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile and Bethel will be reduced to nothing.

[9 : 46] Seek the Lord and live or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire. It will devour them and Bethel will have no one to quench it. There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground.

Verse 10. There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in courts and detest the one who tells the truth. You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain.

Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them. Though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins.

There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. Therefore, the prudent keep quiet in such times for the times are evil.

And it's the same sins that he's bringing up again and again and it's hypocritical worship. Look at verse 5. There are three place names that are mentioned. Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba.

[10 : 55] And these are all important places in Israel. But they're also chronological. So when Jeroboam, son of Nebat, Jeroboam I sets up Israel as an independent kingdom away from Judah, he sets up two special places where he has a golden calf.

One Dan in the north, one Bethel in the south. And God says, this is happening, but don't think Bethel will save you. Don't think this recent relic will give you anything.

And then he mentions Gilgal, which is the first place that Joshua and the 12 tribes celebrate when they get into the promised land. God says, don't even think Gilgal will save you.

Don't even think Gilgal will afford you any protection when my judgment comes. And then he says, don't even go to Beersheba. Now Beersheba is all the way back in Genesis 21.

This is Abraham, the very father of the nation, who forms a treaty with Abimelech there and calls on the name of the Lord as the Lord eternal.

[12 : 03] God says, don't even go to Beersheba. The only place. Don't go on some pilgrimage to all the historic relics of Israel's past because they're all empty.

They're all dysfunctional now, just like your worship has become. Don't retreat to religious observance, he says. Retreat to me.

Seek me and live. Turn to me. The very thing that he was trying to do in all of chapter four. I've sent this to you and that to you and this happened and it was all so you'd return to me.

And so God says, don't whatever you do go on some religious tourist route through your history. Seek me. Seek me because your worship is hypocritical.

It's been the case throughout all of Israel's history. This quote from Isaiah 29 picked up by Jesus. The Lord says, these people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

[13 : 10] Their worship of me is based on merely human rules. They have been taught. That could be a summation of everything we're going to see in Amos chapter five.

It was fine. People were going to church. People were offering sacrifices. It looked pretty good on the outside, but inwardly it was completely rotten and they were in grave danger because the tail was wagging the dog and the process of bringing sacrifices had far exceeded and become more important than the purpose for which they did it.

And so in the summer, I was doing a wedding in Bordeaux and Bordeaux has got wonderful churches that you can go and visit. It's actually built on swampland so they never have the bell tower connected to the cathedral because when the bell rings, the bell tower moves, they all fall over and they don't want it affecting these huge church buildings they have.

But actually, if you went to every single church and Aileen loved the holiday because that's pretty much all we did in Bordeaux, you would think that you worship God with a camera, wearing shorts, reading a guidebook in a different language because in all these churches, that's all that was going on.

It looked like real church buildings in which there should be great worship of God but all there was was full of tourists with selfie sticks taking pictures in front of other people.

[14 : 45] It was all appearance without substance, empty form with no faith and that's what God is saying. Your worship is hypocritical and your past will not save you.

And it's the precipice over which we all stare because we can all retreat to just playing a role, just keeping up appearances, just going through the motions.

God says, there's a funeral coming because you will not turn to me and have life. The second thing he picks up is social injustice again and there's a real catalogue again.

There are those who turn justice into bitterness. People came looking for justice but they were trampled down and now the bitterness just grew because what they deserved they did not get and righteousness was cast to the ground like it was worthless.

People hate the courts, verse 10. The magistrate who was going to give justice had become like the traffic warden and the people that were told, the people who told the truth were just told to shut up.

[15:56] Shut up. Every time somebody said, no, this is what God says. Shut up. Shut up. We don't want to hear. They tax the poor. They make them pay extortionate amounts for their grain.

It's meant that they've all got mansions they can live in but God is very clear you will not live in them. You've stored up all this money to build a very grand nine bedroom house but it will remain empty.

Though you may have boarded off plot you will never live in it. And they've got extensive vineyards. They're thinking we can have some real vintage Merlot from these wonderful vines but the problem with Merlot is it takes time to mature.

And God says, well, you may harvest and you may trample but you will not drink because there's a funeral coming because you haven't worshipped me rightly and you've oppressed the poor.

And so 12a is the verdict for I know how many your offences and how great your sins. Your sin is excessive and it is extensive.

[17:07] Their sins are catalogued. And verse 13 has one of two interpretations therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times for the times are evil. Some commentators say the times are so evil that it's not worth saying anything.

So saturated in sin is Israel culture. But some people go the other way and say, well, when God does judge all this sin everyone's mouths will be stopped because there'll be absolutely no excuse for the way that they've carried on.

Hypocritical worship and social injustice the sins catalogued which were the sins that God catalogued in chapter 4 the sins that God catalogued in chapter 3 and the sins that God catalogued at the end of chapter 2.

And so what do we learn? That these two things really matter to God. These are the things so close to his heart that we worship him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and that we love our neighbor as ourselves.

Our neighbor being those like us and those not like us. Those at the very bottom of the rung of society. There is one little ray of hope and we see that mercy is offered.

[18:26] Look at verse 4 the end of verse 4 seek me and live. Verse 6 seek the Lord and live. Verse 14 seek good nor evil that you may live.

Verse 15 hate evil love good maintain justice. In the courts perhaps the Lord God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. These verses are like patches of blue sky amidst a mounting murky sky.

The nation will be judged. That's already said the funeral will happen. Israel will be carried off by the Assyrians and they will never return. But God holds out here to the individual a chance to the repentant to be part of the remnant.

He's holding out mercy to the individual. He says the ship is going to sink but there is room in the lifeboat if you will but turn to me. 90 will be killed from those who march out from the town but there will be 10 left and you can be amongst those 10 left if you will turn.

You can be like the hind legs of the deer rescued from the mouth of the lion. There is mercy even amidst the darkness.

[19:49] There is hope beyond the exile for those who will repent. and I guess as we come to the New Testament when God is very clear that he will judge the world in justice by the man he has appointed Jesus Christ there is still that hope for those who will look to the son and receive eternal life.

There is mercy offered. There is still space for grace and we see this right in the middle of the chapter and dotted throughout it.

then look with me at verses 15 and 16 verses 16 and 17 therefore this is what the Lord almighty says there will be wailing in all the streets and cries of anguish in every public square the farmers will be summoned to weep and the mourners to wail there will be wailing in all the vineyards for I will

pass through your midst says the Lord.

I don't know if you were aware but Wednesday was back to the future day which in back to the future 2 Marty McFly goes forward to the 21st of October 2015 and there was this real thing about did they get it right was the movie accurate to where we are now some of it was right none of us have got a hoverboard yet but we're ever hopeful and so what we get here is like back to the future we get this snapshot of what it will be like on this day when God visits and it's terrifying there'll be wailing in all the streets George Street Princess Street Ferry Road everybody is crying it's a scene of utter desolation in St.

Andrew Square and Charlotte Square people are crying in anguish look at it end of verse 16 the farmers will be summoned to weep no one bothers farmers if ever you've listened to an episode of the archers the only remarkable thing that happens is that nothing remarkable ever happens because farmers just go about their field tilling and sowing and harvesting they just get on with it but it's so serious now that the farmers are joining in even they've got wind of what will happen and the mourners to wail these professional mourners that people would call in to help bring a bit of theatre to a funeral they're not playing a role they're wailing for real and in vineyards these places synonymous with celebration and joy no one is laughing there's no good times everyone is terrified why because god has arrived the holy god has passed through their midst he threatened it in chapter 4 verse 12 therefore this is what i will do to you israel and because i will do this to you israel prepare to meet your god and he's arrived and it's a scene of utter desolation as a holy god meets a sinful people it has not gone well for them and rather than be great joy it's resulted in great loss that a holy god and sinful people cannot mix we see it in isaiah's life in chapter 6 when he sees the lord seated on the throne this is the holiest man amongst god's people and what does he say woe is me for i'm a man of unclean lips john on the island of patmos who meets the risen jesus and he turns around and sees him and he says i fell on the ground as though dead and if that was what it was like for those two people just imagine what it's like for these people when their god visits while they're playing in the slurry of their own sin and look what this god is like in verse eight he who made the pleiades and orion who turns midnight into dawn and darkens day into night who calls for waters of the sea and pours them out over the face of the land the lord is his name with a blinding flash he destroys the stronghold and brings the fortified city to ruin this is the all-powerful god visiting his people and they've not been ready and they've not been excited by his coming they haven't worshipped him rightly and they have not loved their neighbours themselves and it's all lost but it's of great surprise to them verses 18 to 20 woe to you who long for the day of the lord why do you long for the day of the lord that day will be darkness not light it will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear as though he entered his house and rested his hand on the wall only to have a snake bite him will not the day of the lord be darkness not light pitch dark without a ray of brightness and so you can see them they're all looking for the day of the lord this will go well where is raul we bought some sacrifices and some tithes this morning the day of the lord will be great for us and god gives them a reality check and he says you think it's going to be great it won't be great you think it's going to be light it won't be light it'll be darkness because your complacency has deceived you into thinking that you're safe and you're not safe look at

[25 : 45] verse 19 isn't that the ultimate example of out of the frying pan into the fire it will be as though a man fled from a lion only to meet a bear you think you've escaped you've not escaped there's a bear waiting for you as the lord meets you in your sin as though he entered his house the house that final place of safety and what did he do he rested his hand on the wall to catch his breath and there was a snake to bite him this is a real reality check for Israel that they think that God could have nothing against them that when he comes it will be sheer light and sheer delight and it won't it'll be darkness and devastation as a holy God meets his sinful complacent people who have failed to be failed with the great blessing he's shown them to be a blessing and a light to the nations verse 21 is where we really get the rub of the green look at what God says look at all the words he uses to describe how infuriated and against all their worship he is

I hate I despise your religious festivals your assemblies are a stench to me even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them though you bring choice fellowship offerings I will have no regard for them away with the noise of your songs I will not listen to the music of your hearts but let justice roll on like a river righteousness like a never failing stream God peels back the mask of Israel's religious life and he says this is an utter abomination rather than being pleasing and acceptable to me it actually just riles me to hatred when you gather as a church

it is like a stench in my nostrils look what he says about the harp now who could not like the noise of a harp blink blink blink blink blink there's nothing that could be bad about that but what does he say I will not listen to the music of your harp this instrument synonymous with joy and God says I want nothing to do with it because it's empty it's hypocritical you're going through the motions you're so busy in religious activity and yet your heart is not in it it's like you're wearing a wedding ring as a sign of your marriage and yet you are conducting adulterous relationships in every postcode of the city it's just simple and ritual without any substance at all and look what God says in verse 24 this is what he's after which is where it links with Psalm 51 that

Peter read for us at the beginning but let justice roll on like a river righteousness like a never failing stream you are exhausting yourself in religious activity but what do I want I want justice and righteousness and I want it to flow I want it to be this constant cycle this thing that is always prevalent in your lives justice right living towards your fellow man and righteousness right living before God that's what I want I don't want your offerings I don't want your sacrifices I don't want your harp quartet I'm not bothered how many offerings you bring because until you get those two things right it's utterly useless and you're wasting everybody's time and you're just storing up judgment for yourself and so we look at our lives and could we say that my life is a constant flow of justice where I am passionate about loving those that God loves and this special place he has in his heart for those that are poor and downtrodden is there this constant desire to help them in and through my life and what about how

I walk before God is there this constant desire that I will live life before an audience of one knowing that he sees all and longs to be glorified in all because until I get those two things right church attendance doesn't matter the songs I sing don't matter if my heart is not right before him it is possible for God to hate the fact that you're going to church if you go to church wrongly to not accept the songs out of your mouth if it is just brabble and froth with no substance at all so by the time we get to the end of the old testament and Israel has gone from bad to worse and has been in exile and Judah is back in the town but they're miles away from where they would be God just says I wish someone would shut the temple door put out the fires on the altar because it's abominable to me this has not gone well for

Israel neither will it go well for us it's just bubble and froth with no substance let me finish with this verses 25 to 27 did you bring me sacrifices and offerings for 40 years in the wilderness people of Israel you have lifted up the shrines of your king the pedestal of your idols the star of your God which you made for yourselves therefore I will send you into exile beyond Damascus says the Lord whose name is God almighty here's the question did the people of Israel bring sacrifices and offerings to God in the wilderness oh yes they did because they had this tent of meeting where they could go and offer them but here's what's in view that Israel did all these things they got up in the morning they unzipped their tent and they went and did their religious duty before Yahweh who had brought them out of Egypt the problem was is when they went into their tent at night and the flaps came down then out from under the pillow came the gods of

[32 : 42] Egypt sack off your king Kaiwan your idols and your star gods do you see how duplicitous they were we'll worship gods but we'll keep these as well and so I wonder as we come into land that we're here tonight and we're singing trust and obey there's no other way to be happy in Jesus we're singing all that thrills my heart is Jesus he is everything to me but I wonder what the reality will be on Monday morning what idols we'll bring out from behind up from under our own pillows whether it will be materialism and we'll be ogling the Amazon catalogue I wonder where our security will be found whether it's in the God who's revealed himself or whether it's in the bank statement that drops through the door on Tuesday morning and here's the thing the people in the wilderness thought they were getting away with it and they weren't

God says I saw you pull those idols out and let's be clear he sees the idols that we cleave to and cling to and he finishes by saying you'll go into exile into Damascus and it's all your own fault I gave you everything but you still chose to worship me wrongly and oppress the poor I was preaching at Kirk Liston this morning and I was trying to challenge them about this Old Testament idea of being blameless we read of Noah and Job and David being blameless before the Lord blameless doesn't mean they were sinless it just meant that their insides were the same as their outsides that the reality of how they love God in their hearts seeped out into every area of their lives and I wonder if that's the challenge coming to us from this chapter is to put away hypocrisy to put away going through the motions out of religious duty and to let Jesus take his right place in our hearts that it

might transform every area of our lives and it might make a real difference to our neighbours wherever they might be

God catalogues their sin they're terrified by his presence he extinguishes their light on the day of the Lord he says I hate your worship and I saw your idolatry we read in the New Testament that many people come to Jesus on the last day and say Lord Lord we prophesied in your name and we even healed people and Jesus says away with me I never knew you the same reality seems to be there so let's be very careful as we listen to these words that we don't leave here without having our whole lives committed to and connected to the Lord Jesus who makes our worship acceptable and transforms our lives that we might love what God loves and do what God calls us to do let's pray Father God was so challenged that Israel was just playing at it they were privileged as your people and yet walked away and rebelled in such a complacent way and Lord we thank you so much that you've given us so much you've given us your word you've given us your spirit you've opened your eyes to you've opened our eyes to your son Father you've placed us in a church and yet we're so conscious we're so conscious that we're tempted to just play and go through the motions we're tempted to just do the little bit that we need to do in order to keep up appearances and so Lord I pray that your spirit would so glorify your son in our lives that he might transform everything about us that we might worship you rightly wholeheartedly that we might be those that are blameless and Father that we might love justice Father whether it's the taxes we pay or the people we walk by on the streets Father may we not just turn a blind eye but Lord may we love what you love and as a God who loves them may we love them and help them and serve them also we pray this in Jesus name and for Jesus sake Amen