This is Dr. Gary Yates and his lecture series on the Minor Prophets. This is Lecture number six on the book of Amos: Social Sins.

We’re continuing to study the Book of the Twelve, and we’re focusing on the message of the prophet Amos. At the very beginning of the book of Amos, we have this powerful image of God that really, I think, is kind of foundational to the message of Amos. He says, “The Lord roars from Zion, he utters his voice from Jerusalem; the pastures of the shepherds mourn, and the top of Carmel withers.”

Amos is going to portray God throughout this book as a roaring lion and in an approaching storm, and in light of the historical circumstances and background of Amos’ ministry that we talked about in our previous session, the Assyrian crisis, this powerful Army that is about to invade Israel. We understand why he portrayed God in this way. These people have begun to take God for granted; they have imposed upon God’s grace. They have taken God’s grace for granted. They have taken the blessings that God has given to them for granted. And so God sends [this message to] Amos: leave your home, leave your prosperous business in the in the south, leave the enterprises that you’re doing there. And I want you to go to the north and warn the people of Israel that their disobedience and unfaithfulness and apostasy are going to cause God to send judgment.

If you were a prophet, if you were the prophet Amos, what kind of message would God give you to say to these people? What would it be like to proclaim that message? Well, as Amos preaches to the people of Israel, and as he warns them about God as a roaring lion and an approaching storm, as he tries to wake them up about the seriousness that is about to happen in their history, in light of the
oncoming Assyrian invasion, what issues, and what problems, and what concerns [would you raise]?

Why is God a roaring lion? Why is God so concerned about what is going on in the lives of his people? We’re going to see in the book of Amos that the prophet Amos is going to focus on three specific issues with regard to the people of Israel. And in many ways, I think these issues and these things and these concerns are very representative for us of the messages of the prophets in general. We could take Amos, and I think the message of Amos and the theology of Amos, and look at this book as representative of what prophets in both Israel and Judah, the Assyrian crisis, and the Babylonian crisis are trying to say to the people. And I think the first theme, and the first emphasis that we see in the book of Amos, is that Amos is giving a warning to people who had become complacent in their wealth. Amos is giving a warning to people who had become complacent in their wealth, and we saw this in the last video. God had blessed Israel in an incredible way. God had expanded their borders and their territories under Jeroboam II. International trade had expanded because of the contacts that Jeroboam had created for the people; and during this time of incredible wealth, instead of that blessing leading them to be thankful and grateful for what God has promised them, instead of serving him out of gratitude because he had given them this incredible land and had blessed them in these special ways, they forgot about God! They treated their wealth as the ultimate source of their security and significance. They put God on the back burners of their lives, and they became obsessed with their possessions and the things that God had given to them.

The Old Testament law said that the ultimate command was to, “love God with all of your heart, mind, and strength,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself.” The serious issue here is that wealth had interposed on both of those covenant responsibilities. Instead of loving God, they loved their wealth. And instead of loving their neighbor as themselves, as they had more and more, and
had more and more opportunity to be generous and selfless in the way that they treated each other, they became more greedy, more selfish, more materialistic. And so there are a number of passages where Amos is specifically going to focus on the issue of the greed and the materialism of the people of the Northern Kingdom.

One of those passages is found for us in Amos chapter four, verses one to three. And Amos is going to begin this by, in a sense, sort of sarcastically addressing the wealthy women of the Northern Kingdom. And he says, “Hear this, you cows of Bashan.” OK. Now, Bashan was this prime agricultural place in the land of Israel. The strongest, fattest, most valuable livestock was from this particular part of Israel. And that’s the terminology that Amos uses to address the wealthy women of Samaria. And any preacher who has the courage to say that about women in his audience is a man that I respect. I do not plan to imitate him at any time in my future ministry, but “Hear this word, you cows of Bashan.” They don’t have a weight problem, they have a prosperity problem. And he says “…who are in the mountains, who are on the mountains of Sumeria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring that we may drink.’” And so what we have here is a picture of these women who are only concerned about their own needs, their own pleasure, and they are oppressing the poor at the same time that they say to their husbands, “Bring us more alcohol to drink so we can satisfy our needs.”

God says that he is going to deal with this issue and deal with these people, and here’s the judgment that he will bring against them: “‘The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that behold the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out through the breeches, each one of you ahead, and you shall be cast out into Hermon,’ declares the Lord.” And so these women that have experienced this incredible prosperity—you can look at Isaiah chapter three and the way that he
speaks to the wealthy and [to the] prosperous women of Judah; there it says essentially the same thing to them—they are going to be taken away in exile. They have lived in luxury, they have ignored the needs of other people, they have taken advantage of the poor. And so as a result of that, they are going to experience all of the horrors of exile. And it says, “They are going to lead you away with hooks.”

We have images and we have inscriptions and reliefs from the Assyrians that actually portray the Assyrian kings or the Assyrian commanders leading their captors away with hooks through their noses or their mouths. That’s going to happen to the rich women of Israel that have been consumed, that have been consumed with their own wealth and their own pleasure. Amos addresses this issue in chapter six, verses one to seven. And he’s actually even going to speak about people in Judah who have the same problem.

They have enjoyed the prosperous reign of Uzziah, and again, instead of that leading them to the Lord, it has lead them away from God. And so Amos says in chapter six, verses one to seven, “Woe!” And whenever that word is used in the prophets, the idea of woe is an announcement of death. This is a woe oracle. It’s almost like a funeral lament for someone. Amos is saying, “Look, death is coming because you have ignored your neighbors. You have lived at ease in Zion.” And I like the way the NET Bible [New English Translation] translates this woe oracle idea: “Those who live in ease at Zion are as good as dead. They have an opportunity to see their funeral before it ever happens; and if they do not change their ways, if they do not give up this greedy, materialistic outlook on life, then God is going to ultimately judge them. Woe to those who are at ease in Zio, and to those who feel secure on the mountain of Samaria.”

So you imagine the wealthy and prosperous Southern Kingdom of Zion, Jerusalem. In the north you had the wealthy, prosperous city of Samaria and the rich and the wealthy people that lived there, those who were associated with the king and the bureaucracy, and had enjoyed all the benefits of both the reign of
Jeroboam II and Uzziah [in Judah]. Those are the people that are targeted by God for judgment. They’re described in the rest of verse one: The notable men are the first in the nation, to whom the house of Israel comes [for leadership], and in spite of this lofty position of leadership, in spite of the lifestyle that they’ve enjoyed, God targets them as the ones that are going to experience judgment.

We have a further description of this as this continues, this oracle continues, in verse four, “Woe to those”—again an announcement of death. There is a funeral coming, and the funeral is going to be these rich and wealthy people. “Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory and stretch themselves out on their couches.” So we can imagine these people just in the lap of luxury. “Who eat lambs from the flocks and calves from the midst of the stall.” They have plenty to eat, they eat the most wealthy and expensive meat. Verse five, “They sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music. Who drink wine by the bowlfuls and anoint themselves with the finest of oils, but they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.” And so you can imagine people here again: they’re living in the lap of luxury, they are on their beds of ivory, they have plenty to eat, they sing songs, they play music, they drink wine by the bowlful—their lives are consumed by pleasure. And as a result of this they do not understand the ruin that is going to come upon Joseph that the prophets are warning them about. Verse seven says this, “Therefore, they shall now be the first of those who go into exile, and the revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away.” We’ve emphasized this: God does not capriciously judge people. God’s judgments are not random; God’s judgments are not unfair; there is a real sense here in which the judgment that Amos is warning these people of, the punishment fits the crime. Because they have lived in luxury and ignored God and ignored others, those people are going to be the ones that are specifically targeted for the judgment of exile, and all of the horrors and deprivations are going to occur when the Assyrians take them over.
The word in verse seven that is translated in the ESV: it says, “The revelry of those who stretch themselves out shall pass away.” The Hebrew word there is the word *mirzach*, and as we look at this particular cognate word and the root word as it’s used in other languages and in literature outside the Bible, there were these specific feasts and festivals called the *mirzach* festivals. And they involved the worship of pagan gods, lavish amounts of food and drink and alcohol. Pleasure and sexual immorality was often associated with that, and it was often done in the context of worshipping other gods in these pagan contexts.

The fact that Amos uses this particular word to talk about the revelry, I think, it gives us another understanding of what we have in verse four—lying on their beds of ivory, singing songs, eating meat, drinking wine by the bowlfuls. It’s not just extravagant lifestyle, but it’s actually buying in to the paganism of the culture that’s around them.

Amos and the prophets want us to understand wealth in and of itself is not evil, [and] I think that’s a Biblical perspective. Everything that we have in life God gives us to enjoy, but there is a danger in wealth and in materialism that it ultimately draws us away from God when that becomes the focus of our lives. God often blesses people in the Old Testament like Job and Abraham with great wealth, but that wealth can become an obstacle. Deuteronomy warned the people of Israel, when you enjoy the wealth, and the benefits, and the blessings of the Promised Land, that’s going to have a tendency to draw you away from God. Paul warns us in his letter to Timothy, “Warn those who are rich to be careful about the dangers.” Money itself is not the root of all evil. Paul says that the *love* of money is the root of all evil, and I think we see that idea here in the book of Amos as well. God is going to judge those who have become complacent in their wealth.

Now, I want us to think about eighth century Israelites and Judahites that are being drawn into that, and think about us, and compare that to our culture today. When I look at the typical representation or drawing of a house during the
Iron Age in Israel, what I see there is a very simple structure; it’s not a place that I would want to live; I wouldn’t even want to have that as my college dorm room. They shared their domicile with their livestock. Okay. Those people who lived in those kinds of structures, they were tempted by the dangers of materialism. If that is true of them, then what chance do we have today in the West with all the possessions, all of the wealth and the incredible things that we enjoy? This is a real temptation that we need to take seriously. When I look at the things in ancient Israel in the eighth century that [were] in the city of Samaria, for example, [I see things that] would have been used as a status symbol. It was not a fifty-inch TV, it was not a new car; it was not those kinds of things. It was expensive jewelry, or it was ivory carvings that might be on your house or in your furniture in your house. If those people struggled with materialism, how much more do we need to be careful of the dangers that are there for us today? So there is a good warning from these people and their simple life: and if we would look at the wealthiest Israelites, and they lived at a standard that would be in some sense below what we would live, and if those people were tempted by this, what chance do we have? If these people were tempted by the enticements of pleasure and personal indulgents, how much more do we have to be careful with that when we live in a culture that is obsessed with sex and sexual fulfillment and alcohol and living for the next high?

John tells us to love not the world and that the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, [and] the pride of life, those are going to be the things that are going to draw us away from God. That does not encourage us to draw up our own list of legalistic things that we do and do not do, but it does remind us that pleasure, and wealth, and personal indulgence, and the enticement of sex, and drugs, and alcohol, all of those things are things that we need to give attention to. Those of us that are parents need to remind our children of those kinds of things. And so I think the eighth century prophets have some things that are very relevant for us
today to think about. Amos gives a warning to people that were complacent in their wealth.

Now the second thing that Amos is going to focus on, and this is very closely related to what we just talked about, Amos is going to give a warning to people who are not practicing justice toward the poor and the needy. And I think most of us who know anything at all about the prophets, we know that the theme of social justice is a recurring idea in the message of the prophets. And the reason for that is, because of the things that were going on in the eighth century as Israel had experienced this incredible prosperity, instead of being the kind of society that God wanted them to be, where they loved their neighbor, where they generously loaned things to their neighbor, where they took care of each other, where they looked out for the needs of others above themselves, they had become a society where they were obsessed with wealth to the extent that they took advantage of their poor neighbors. So Amos chapter two, verse four, or Amos chapter two, verses six and following, are going to focus on the all the various ways that the people of Israel were not practicing justice towards their neighbors. The prophet says, “Thus says the Lord, ‘For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke their punishment because they sell the righteous for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the head of the poor into the dust of the earth; they turn aside the way of the afflicted. A man and his father go into the same girl so that my holy name is profaned; they lay themselves down beside every alter on garments that are taken in pledge, and in the house of their God they drink the wine of those who have been fine.’”

So when Amos wants to give us a list and a catalogue of the sins of the people of Israel, the list that he gives us focuses specifically on the ways that they have taken advantage of the poor. They are so obsessed with wealth that they are willing to sell the righteous for a pair of shoes. They take advantage of these poor servant girls: that both father and son are both sleeping with these women and
sexually taking advantage of them. They worship God while they sit on the garments of these poor people, and they see no inconsistency with that. And so there is an emphasis, there’s a message throughout the book of Amos, that they have ignored the needs of the poor.

We saw that in Chapter four the fat cows of Bashan who are consumed with themselves: they oppress the poor and take advantage of the needy as a way of lining their own pockets. In Chapter five, where there are these recurring calls to repent on the part of Amos to the people, he’s going to say in Chapter four, “Seek me and live”; verse six, “Seek the Lord and live”; verse fourteen, “Seek good and not evil.” Well, in verse fifteen we get an idea of exactly what Amos means by seeking good and not evil or seeking the Lord. Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord, the God of Hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. The only potential, the only way that Israel is going to experience God’s mercy and grace and forgiveness is if they abandon this way of life where they’re taking advantage of the poor.

Verse twenty-four of Chapter five, Amos is going to say, “Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing spring.” So when Amos talks about repentance, he’s not just talking about going into a room and praying and confessing your sins to God; he is specifically telling the people of Israel that they need to revise their behavior towards each other. And they need to get back to the place where God had called them to care for the needy and love their neighbor as themselves.

As we’re looking at this, and we’re looking at the message of Amos in light of the Old Testament as a whole, I think what we understand is Amos is reminding the people that they have become exactly the opposite of what God had designed the people of Israel to be. God had designed Israel to be a prototype, a model, an example for other nations, to demonstrate to them the way that society was supposed to be. For us today, that does not mean that we put the Old Testament
law into practice, but it does mean that even as Christians and as believers, and even though we are no longer under the Mosaic covenant, we look at the Old Testament for the values, the priorities that were important to God as he established the society, as he established the holy nation that was going to be a light to other peoples. This is what this society, this is what culture was supposed to be about. And what God emphasized for the people of Israel is that they were to be a people of justice—the Hebrew word is mishpat. But what justice means in Israel and what justice means in the Old Testament may not be exactly what we think of. We normally think of justice, and we think that justice involves giving people what they deserve. It means living according to the principle of the law. And that's an important part of justice, but in the Old Testament justice is something more than that. Justice is not simply just giving people what they deserve; the Bible expands the idea to say that true justice involves being willing to give people what they need as well. And justice in a society as God has designed it, and the way that God has set up, and the way God designed the people of Israel meant that those who had more then they needed would ultimately be willing to give to those who did not have enough.

The problem is that when wealth becomes the focus of your life. When that becomes the idol that you live for, when that becomes the thing that determines your ultimate security and significance, it becomes so important that you will do anything it takes to get that. And so if wealth becomes my ultimate good; if personal indulgence, if pleasure, if satisfying my needs becomes the ultimate good in my life instead of good, instead of God himself, I will do whatever it takes to satisfy those longings. Instead of trusting God to meet my needs, I will trust in myself, my own efforts, my own endeavors to get that. And if I have to commit violence, or if I have to commit injustice, or I have to take advantage of someone else, that god that I'm pursuing is so important to me that I'll do that. And So Amos is going to emphasize the importance of practicing justice.
Also in chapter five, verses eleven and twelve, it sounds very much like the list and the catalog of sins we see in chapter two. "The people of Israel," beginning in verse ten, let me begin in verse ten, "they hate him who reproves in the gate, they abhor him who speaks the truth." They don't want people to remind them of what God expects of them because that's not what they do. Instead they, "Trample on the poor, they exact taxes of grain from him. You have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not dwell in them. You have planted pleasant vineyards but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins, you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, who turn aside the needy in the gate. Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time, for it is an evil time."

So again they're taking advantage of the poor. [As for] God's judgment, the punishment will fit the crime because he's going to take away the things that they have extracted from others either through dishonest practices, or through oppression, or through greed, and through their own arrogance and sin. What Amos says is exactly what Isaiah is going to say in chapter five, verses eight to ten, "Woe to those who add field to field and house to house; and because you've done that, you're never going to have the opportunity to live in those houses because you've taken the fields that God gave to individual Israelites as their heritage and inheritance from the Lord, and you've made it your own in a dishonest way. I'm going to cause that land not to produce, and you're not going to enjoy its benefits and its blessings." That's the message of the prophet Amos; he's warning these people who have failed to practice justice that there's going to be an accounting for the way they've treated their neighbors. Again as we put Amos in the context of the Old Testament, it is a reminder of all of the ways that Israelite society in the eighth century was exactly the opposite of what God had designed.

And I want to go back to the Old Testament law, back to the Pentateuch and the Torah, and just remind us of some of the things that God had said to the
Israelites about the way that they were to treat each other. And I want to take those ideals and those designs and what God had intended and place them beside what we've just looked at in Amos, and I think the difference here is obvious. God had told the people of Israel in the Torah that they were to care for the poor and the needy in some very specific ways. And whether this was a law code that they were to follow in exact detail, or whether this was something that merely taught them an ideal, a deep concern for the poor and needy is something that is part of the ethic of the Torah. In Exodus chapter twenty-two, verses twenty-five and twenty-seven, it tells us there that if an Israelite gave a loan to another Israelite and took a pledge for that loan, if that person was so poor that the only thing they could give as a pledge was their own cloak or their coat, the rich neighbor was to go to his poor neighbor who had given him the cloak as a pledge and was to allow him to have that overnight so that he didn't get cold. You were supposed to be so concerned for this poor person that you would go back every night and give the cloak. I think the ultimate design of that law was that you don't take the cloak as a pledge to begin with. Do you see the difference between that and what's going on in Amos? In Amos it says, in chapter two, verse eight, "They lay themselves down besides every altar on garments taken in pledge." So instead of living by the standard of the Torah, they were coming to the sanctuary and laying out the pledge that they had taken from their neighbor, the garment they were using that was their pallet while they worshiped the Lord. There is something fundamentally inconsistent and incoherent with this.

Exodus chapter twenty-three, verse six: Do not deny justice to the poor in legal proceedings. Do poor people always get a fair shake in the court room? That didn't happen in ancient Israel it doesn't happen in our culture. But that was what God designed for the people of Israel.

Deuteronomy chapter fifteen, verse one: Every seven years the Israelites were to cancel all of the debts and God did this so that people would not have to
live in sustained, systemic poverty that was passed on from one generation to the next. If a person did go into debt, and did have to become a debt servant, there was the opportunity at the end of that process that they could become free and go back to having viable lifestyle. So as my students have asked “couldn’t we practice this with student loans?”

Deuteronomy fifteen would be a great passage there, but God had designed this as a way of making sure that poverty wasn’t something that continues generation after generation. Leviticus chapter nineteen and Deuteronomy chapter twenty four: If I was a land owner and if I had been blessed by God with crops, ultimately those crops did not belong exclusively to me. They were ultimately a gift from God, and as a result from that, I was to allow the poor to glean in my fields. This was an ancient welfare system. It wasn't simply a hand out; the poor would have to work for it. But I took what I had been blessed by God with, and I was willing to share it. The poor person could glean in the corners of the field, and when they were harvesting grain and there were stalks of grain that were left in the field, I was not to go back over that [part of the field]; I was to leave that for the poor person.

Deuteronomy chapter fifteen, verses twelve to fourteen: Release your Hebrew debt slaves every seven years. The Israelites were not to permanently enslave their fellow Israelites. We know from the book of Jeremiah in Judah, in Jeremiah chapter thirty-five, that in the cities of Judah, the Jews there had not followed this custom of releasing their debt slaves; and when the Babylonians are about to attack the city, they temporarily let their slaves go as a way of trying to gain God's favor. When the political and military pressure of the invading army is released, they take their slaves back. I think that we can imagine that same kind of thing was going on in the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Deuteronomy chapter twenty-three: Do not charge interest on loans that you give to your fellow Israelites, you were allowed to do that with foreigners but
you were not allowed to do that with Israelites. Your focus in giving a loan to another person was not on the interest that you could get from them; it was on helping your neighbor and helping him in a time of need and crisis.

Deuteronomy chapter ten verse eighteen: Show justice and compassion to widows and to orphans. In many ways they were at the bottom of the ladder. They were the most needy people in this culture. God was a God who showed compassion to widows and orphans. God cares about Ruth when she is an alien in the land of Israel. The Israelites, they were to care about that as well; they were to reflect the character of God instead of taking advantage of the needy; they were to help the widows and the orphans.

Deuteronomy chapter fifteen, I think, is a key chapter and something that was to provide some guiding principles for Israelites as they thought about how do we respond to our fellow Israelites when they are in need? And I think this is a key passage in kind of teaching us the ethic of the Torah. I want to look at three specific verses in Deuteronomy fifteen. Deuteronomy fifteen, verse four, says this, “But there will be no poor among you, for the lord will bless you in the land that the lord your God has given you for an inheritance to possess.” And we look at this and say, “Well, what could this passage possibly be talking about—there will be no poor among you.” We read in Amos that there were definitely poor people among them. We see that in every period of Israel's history. There were people that were poor and needy, but Deuteronomy fifteen, verse four, is giving us an ideal, and it’s reminding us that the blessings of the Promised Land, they are extensive, and God is going to bless his people in such an abundant way if they have lived in the way that God had designed for them to live. There was no need for anyone to be poor because there would always be Israelites who had more than they needed who would be able to share with their neighbors who did not have enough. That’s what justice was. This was not provision that I [an Israelite] had
earned on my own. This was something that had come to me from God, and I have a responsibility to share it with my neighbor.

Chapter fifteen, verse eleven in Deuteronomy. Here’s a second principle, and in some ways it sounds like a contradiction of what we just read in Deuteronomy fifteen, verse four. But that’s the ideal; here’s the reality: verse eleven says, “For there will never cease to be poor in the land.” [The ideal is that] there never will be poor; you’re going to be blessed enough that really, as a society, there is no need for there to be poor people; but the reality is there will never cease to be poor in the land. And I think there is a tendency to read that verse and stop and say, “Well, that’s just the reality; that’s just the way life is. There’s nothing we can do about it. Let’s just accept that.” But actually God gives them a command and an instruction that’s based on the fact there are always going to be poor people among you. Therefore, here’s the inference: “I command you. You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy, and to the poor in your land. You are not to be tight-fisted toward your fellow Israelite. You are to be generous because the Lord is going to bless you. There are always going to be poor in the land [and] you have a responsibility to meet that need.

And then I think a verse that even goes beyond all of this and ultimately explains the why, and explains the motivation of why the Israelites were to treat the poor people in this way, that is there as a reminder from God, comes in Deuteronomy chapter fifteen, verse fifteen: And the Lord says there, “As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.” Talking about when you release a debt slave from slavery. You’re not supposed to just let him go and let him be free. You’re to give him provisions so that he can start his new life as he lives in freedom. You shall give to him and you shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore, I command you this day. What’s the ultimate motivation? God had saved them out
of slavery; God had blessed them in every way possible. And so they were to be generous to those in need as they remembered what God had done for them.

And I think we are reminded in the rest of the Old Testament, and we are particularly reminded in the eighth century prophets, that this is not the kind of society that Israel had become. They were not taking care of the poor and needy because God had blessed them. They had experienced incredible wealth and prosperity, and it had turned around and had become a pretext for their own greed, their own materialism, their own selfishness, because they had made this their god. And if I have to oppress; and if I have to commit violence; if I have to take this away from someone, I am so obsessed with this [that I’ll do it]. This has become the focal point of my life to where I have to have this. And so I think it’s very interesting, and one of the things that you may do as you teach the prophets—I think it’s very interesting to take Deuteronomy fifteen and lay out these three principles—there is no need for there to be poor among you; however, there is always going to be poor among you; therefore, open your hand, and you are to give to the poor, and you are to give to the needy, because God has blessed you. And to lay that alongside of [what was happening], look at the things that are going on in eighth century Israel; look at the fat cows of Bashan, and ask how these women add up with Deuteronomy fifteen. Look at chapter six and what it says about those who are at ease in Zion and who are living in comfort and taking part in these mirzach festivals and feasts in Amos chapter six. How do they look when we compare them to Deuteronomy chapter fifteen? There is a reminder in all of this that again Israel was called to be a model and a paradigm to the other nations of what a society was supposed to look like.

And the reality is that when they wanted to have gods and kings and rulers like all of the other nations, the thing that followed from that is that their lifestyle and their behavior became like the other nations as well. When Ahab and Jezebel promote the worship of Baal, you have an entirely different god being brought into
Israelite society. You have gods who are just like humans: greed, materialism, violent, drunkards, all these kinds of things. When you worship a god like that, you ultimately follow in their lifestyle. There’s a difference between worshipping a god whose great act in the Old Testament is rescuing a group of people out of slavery and bondage—that’s the ethos of the God of Israel: he cares about the poor and the needy. That is different from the ethos of the gods of the Canaanites who kill, murder, commit adultery, sleep around, do whatever, because their needs are the ultimate thing. When you serve one of those gods, it ultimately leads down a different path than serving the God of Israel.

And so that’s what’s happened in Israel. Jezebel and Ahab, when they want the vegetable garden—when they want the land of Naboth to make that a vegetable garden, they have the right to take that land and to kill because that’s the ethos of the gods that they follow; that’s the behavior of their god. When you follow the behavior of the God of Israel, when you share his values, when you share his priorities, that changes the way that you live. It changes the way that you look at other people, and I think the application and the carryover to the New Testament, it’s pretty clear and obvious to us.

James, who I think in many ways has just deeply imbibed into the ethos of the Old Testament, says true religion and undefiled, it’s not the rituals and it’s not the activities. It’s caring for the poor, visiting those that are sick and in need, and living an unstained life in the world. So, for people who think that the message of the Old Testament prophets is irrelevant to our culture and our society today, we understand that the prophets are warning the people about wealth; they’re warning the people about the ethos that grows out of that, and I think the behavior, again in eighth century Israel when I look at what the prophets are saying to these people, it often sounds exactly like they’re speaking to our contemporary culture today. There’s not a lot of difference. Sin hasn’t changed, the hearts of people haven’t changed, and so the application issues that grow out of this, I think, are very real.
In many ways evangelical Christianity, I think, has lost its understanding of the need for caring for the poor and taking care of the needy, and I think one of the reasons that that has happened as we look at this historically may be that we have not made either the Torah or the Old Testament prophets enough of our own personal spiritual diet as we’re reading God’s Word, or it may be something that we have just simply not taught enough in the churches. And we have a number of writers and speakers—I think of David Platt and his book—who have begun to talk about the importance that, look, taking care of the needy is not inconsistent with preaching the gospel.

We do not have to, we do not have to go the way of the social gospel, and make that simply the focus of our ministry and our message, but God has not just called us to take care of preaching the gospel and people’s spiritual needs. If we are interested in people’s spiritual needs, we are going to first of all minister to their physical needs, and often in many countries the only way that we’re going to have a real open door to preach the gospel is that we’re going to have to begin by meeting people’s needs and taking care of the poor. This not something that is secondary to our mission; it’s something that goes right along with the preaching and the proclamation of the gospel, and so I think one of the reasons that we’ve lost sight of that, it’s not just the influence of the social gospel and wanting to avoid that, it’s often that we have ignored how much the Old Testament informs our ethic and our values and our priorities as Christians.

A book that has helped me with this, Christopher Wright has written a book called *Old Testament Ethics for the People Of God* and reminding us that the ethos of the Torah, its concern for the needy, its concern for the poor, that’s something, that needs to be reflected in our values and our ethics as Christians. We can look at the book of Deuteronomy, and we can see chapter fifteen—“There should be no poor among you. However, there is going to be poor among you; therefore, open your hand and be generous to your neighbor.” We can look at that as we go to the
New Testament. I think it informs our reading of the book of Acts. And we see in Acts chapter four and Acts chapter five that the early church shared all things in common, and there were those like Barnabas who had more than they needed, who were willing to sell or to give that away to bring that to the apostles so that they could meet the needs of their poor neighbors. What is happening there is that I think the book of Acts is emphasizing the point: the church is beginning to function—the church is beginning to function—the church is a model here of what God designed Israel to be from the very beginning and that often through their—through their history, they had failed to be. As God is working and making this new community in the church, they are fulfilling what Deuteronomy fifteen had talked about.

To think about how the prophetic message is relevant for us today as we deal with these three issues of wealth and greed and materialism, and then the way that that bleeds over into our ethos of justice, I wanted to look at Isaiah chapter five and listen to his message. Isaiah is a younger contemporary of the prophet Amos; he is from the same century. He’s a prophet to the kingdom of Judah, and again listen to what he says to Judah in the eighth century and to the various sins that he’s going to document. Verse eight: “Woe to those who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is no more room, and you are made to dwell alone in the midst of the land. The Lord of Hosts has sworn in my hearing: ‘Surely there are many houses that will be desolate, large and beautiful houses that will be left without inhabitant, for ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath, and a homer of seed one—only one—ephah.’’’ So they’re greedy and materialistic, and they’re seizing lands and doing these things in unjust ways—does that sound like things that go on in the corporate world today?

Verse eleven: “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may run after strong drink, who tarry late into the evening as wine inflames them!” Do we know anything about a culture that’s obsessed with personal pleasure—drugs
and alcohol, and that becomes a struggle? Hey, that’s—that’s our culture; that’s our society.

Look at what it says in verse eighteen: “Woe to those who draw iniquity with cords of falsehood, who draw sins around as with cart ropes and say: ‘Let God be quick, and let him speed his work that we may see it.’” Do we know anything about a culture where people defy God to punish them for their sin? “Woe to those who call good evil and evil good.” Huh, do we ever see that on radio or television talk shows where there’s moral confusion. This is our society.

Chapter five, verse twenty-one: “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes.” Chapter twenty-two: “Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine.” So for those of you that are pastors and are involved in a ministry of teaching God’s Word to other people, I—I want you to understand how relevant the message of the prophets really is to our society and our culture today.

There are several key themes that are going to run throughout the book of Amos. The first one is that Amos is going to confront the people; they are complacent in their wealth. That’s become the focus of their life.

The second message that he’s going to give them, they have not practiced justice toward their neighbor. They have not lived out the principles and ideals of Deuteronomy chapter fifteen, and so there’s some things here in this book that should also cause us to examine our heart and to look at our churches, and how much we reflect the ethos of a God who cares about the poor and the needy, and become a community who remembers how important that really is to God.

I hope our study of the book of Amos will help us to be reminded of that.

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