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## THE PRIORITY OF JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Now and then we come across stories that are both humorous and sad. During World War II in the Pacific Theater our forces set up a base on the island of New Guinea. We built an airport with runways, a tower, lights along the runways, and the necessary buildings. Cargo planes would fly in and people would unload supplies for distribution to other battle areas in the South Pacific. Some aboriginal people on that island were very primitive. They had never seen an airplane and they thought it was a great bird that brought gifts. It was obvious to them that these outsiders had come to the island and built a trap that would lure these giant birds so they could get the gifts. They built their own version of an airport. They cleared the land for a runway, put up a tower built of sticks and thatch, set out torches along the makeshift runway and waited for the great bird to come bring them gifts from the sky. They manned their “airport” day and night and faithfully watched but no birds came. Humorous? Maybe. In a way, it is sad!

I sometimes wonder if we, in the church, have not drifted so far away from true worship of God that we are doing nothing more than going through the motions of religious practice without anymore basis than the natives of New Guinea had for their “airport.” In a way, it is even more sad in the case of the present-day churches in that many who attend do not even have the anticipation and expectant hope of the aborigines. When we do not connect our worship and relationship to God to real life, then those things we do in our rituals are superficial and meaningless.

During the time of Amos, the Northern Kingdom of Israel had allowed their religious practices to become disconnected from real life. Though this disconnection existed, they still carried out their ritualistic rites of religious routine. After this “performance” was over, they treated each other without regard for what God wanted in their relationships. This lack of justice and righteousness, especially in relation to the poor and needy, angered God and He sent Amos to warn the Israelites of the impending judgment that was to come upon them.

<sup>1</sup> Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria, Who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, Who say to your husbands, “Bring now, that we may drink!” <sup>2</sup> The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness, “Behold, the days are coming upon you When they will take you away with meat hooks, And the last of you with fish hooks. <sup>3</sup> “You will go out *through* breaches *in the* walls, Each one straight before her, And you will be cast to Harmon,” declares the LORD. Amos 4:1-3 (NASB95)

Interestingly, God had Amos speak a warning to the women of the area. In their greed for luxury they goaded their husbands into acts of injustice. Amos’ message was that the walls of the city (what they trusted in for security) would fail them and their enemies would lead them away with hooks in their flesh.

<sup>4</sup> “Enter Bethel and transgress; In Gilgal multiply transgression! Bring your sacrifices every morning, Your tithes every three days. <sup>5</sup> “Offer a thank offering also from that which is leavened, And proclaim freewill offerings, make them known. For so you love *to do*, you sons of Israel,” Declares the Lord GOD. Amos 4:4-5 (NASB95)

In a mocking way, God told them to keep up what they were doing with their false, hypocritical worship. Bethel and Gilgal were two of the more popular worship centers in Israel. It was at Bethel that Jacob had his vision of the ladder that spanned between heaven and earth. It was at Gilgal that Joshua dispatched the spies to Jericho. Both these places that had begun with

meaningful religious significance for the nation had now become centers of perverse religious practice. God had already pronounced the coming judgment or consequences of what they were doing. They could ensure that judgment would come upon them by just continuing in their sins.

The reference to “bring your tithes every three days” may be better translated “bring your tithes on the third day.” Going to a religious center required a significant journey and the visit lasted several days. Each day would start with morning sacrifices and apparently on the third day, the tithe would be given.

Much of their religious practice was done to be seen of other people. Just as Jesus had criticized the Pharisees for praying on the street corners to be seen of men and the hypocrites for sounding a trumpet when they helped the needy, God was critical of Israel for bragging about the help they provide to others as a freewill offering. God looks at the attitude of the heart and He was not pleased with Israel though the people were going through the motions of religious practices.

God had Amos remind the people of the chastisement He had sent to them to get them to repent. Drought, crop failure, mildew, and locust were allowed to plague them and yet they did not turn away from their sinful way and return to God. They refused to recognize such problems as judgements from God. This refusal is very similar to the arguments we hear today regarding natural disasters and social ills that plague our present-day world. There are significant earthquakes, famines, random killings by crazy people, people blow up airplanes and buildings, and ravaging diseases such as AIDS bring terror to people. Nevertheless, we have not repented and turned to God Who can save us. We are as blind and perhaps more so than the nation of Israel.

<sup>18</sup> Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD, For what purpose *will* the day of the LORD *be* to you? It *will be* darkness and not light; <sup>19</sup> As when a man flees from a lion And a bear meets him, Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall And a snake bites him. <sup>20</sup> *Will not the day of the LORD be* darkness instead of light, Even gloom with no brightness in it? Amos 5:18-20 (NASB95)

Many churches today put a lot of emphasis on the Second Coming of Jesus. They look forward, with great hope and expectation, for the time when Jesus will return. They see it as a glorious time when true Christians will be raptured (caught up) out of this world. They wish that the Lord would not delay His return. In a similar way, the Israelites looked forward to a time when God would bring judgment on the nations and vindicate Israel. They looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. It was likely a surprise to them that Amos pronounced “woe” upon them. They had not taken into account that judgment must begin with God’s people. If they really anticipated an outpouring of God’s judgment, then they should have been preparing themselves through repentance and obedience to escape the consequences of judgment. Amos told them they were living as dangerously as a person who might meet a lion or a bear in the street or have snakes in their home. They thought they were immune from the judgment just because they were Israelites. What they thought would be a day of rejoicing would be a day of darkness and woe.

Peter gave a similar warning to the First Century Christians who were looking forward to the Christ’s return. He told them that God was delaying judgment so they could make every effort to be spotless, blameless, and at peace with Him (2 Pet 3:14). What many present-day Christians fail to realize is that the time of Christ return will be preceded by tribulation and persecution. There will be global upheavals in the physical realm and the governments of the world. In Jesus’ discourse in Matthew 24, He told us that unless those days are shortened, no

one would survive.

<sup>21</sup> “I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies. <sup>22</sup> “Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept *them*; And I will not *even* look at the peace offerings of your fatlings. <sup>23</sup> “Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. Amos 5:21-23 (NASB95)

The people of Israel were going through the motions of religious observance without regard for what God expected or required. They were doing what they wanted to do because it made them feel good. God’s reaction to their actions was one of revulsion. Because their hearts were not right toward God, the outward acts of celebrating religious holidays, offering sacrifices and signing hymns were nothing more than a sham. We must keep in mind what God told Samuel regarding the selection of a king for the nation: “for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart.” If our heart is not right with God, then God will not accept neither us nor what we do.

<sup>24</sup> “But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:24 (NASB95)

If our hearts are right with God, then it is because we have allowed God to give us a new heart. When we do this, the “love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.” Jesus told us “Whoever believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.” Amos also referred to waters flowing when people were in right relationship with God. These streams of living water would carry justice and righteousness and it will be a mighty stream. Justice and righteousness are characteristics of God and will be the outcome of our lives as Jesus lives in us.

The failure of Israel to make a connection between their religion rituals and their daily lives should serve as a warning for us in the church today that justice and righteousness are still priorities with God and judgment results with these are absent.