Choosing from Our Greed

Amos 8:4-7

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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On Tuesday, I had to drive to Richmond. When I started pastoring 11 years ago, still a seminary student, I had to make that trip from Buckingham at least twice a week. I was used to it then – but no more. That drive seems to get longer every time I take it! There is, however, one benefit to the drive: right at the intersection of Rt. 60 and Rt. 288 is a wonderful restaurant named Chick-fil-A. I love Chick-fil-A! The chicken is delicious, my wife really likes the waffle fries, and if you need a sugar fix, they even have good milkshakes. Every time I go to Richmond, I get something to eat at that Chick-fil-A.

Besides having really good chicken, Chick-fil-A is known for at least one other thing: they aren’t open on Sundays. And while there have been a few times I’ve been frustrated by that – because the strongest cravings for Chick-fil-A come on Sunday afternoons, you know – I also respect Chick-fil-A for that. It is a key component of their corporate philosophy, with founder Truett Cathy stating that all Chick-fil-A employees should have an opportunity to rest, spend time with family and friends, and worship if they choose to do so. In a business climate driven by the desire to maximize profits, voluntarily closing your business for one out of every seven days for your employees’ benefit is commendable.

Of course, many here may remember when policies such as Chick-fil-A’s were the norm, not the exception. Indeed, there was a time in our nation’s history when such limitations were codified in what were known as “blue laws”: restrictions placed on commerce on days of worship and rest, typically Sundays. Such laws are still constitutionally valid, upheld by a number of court cases, but have fallen out of favor in vast swaths of our country.[[1]](#footnote-1) Why? Because for many in our society, and indeed even in our churches, Sabbath observance is a mere religious ritual, and religious rituals can easily lose their power and meaning. For many, including many faithful Christians, the Sabbath isn’t about anything other than obeying a religious rule, and religious rules quickly can become passé, irrelevant, or downright inconvenient.

This is certainly how the businessmen of the city, Amos’ target in our passage today, viewed commands like Sabbath observance: a religious ritual that got in the way of what was really important, namely, making lots and lots of money. And it wasn’t just the Sabbath observance; the same merchants and shopkeepers and bankers and small business owners felt that many of the scriptural commands got in the way of good business sense. Biblical injunctions about fair business practices, the value and worth of everyone, the need for equity for the poor, and the concern of God for the needy were, to them, just pious platitudes that got in the way of windfall profits. So what did they do? Well, according to Amos, they either paid lip service to the commands of God before doing what they wanted – or outright flouted them altogether.

It started for them with the Sabbath. Many of us have come to see the Sabbath command as a religious rule about honoring God. We read the 4th Commandment, “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy,” and believe the whole point of it is to simply reflect on God and offer our rest to him as an offering, since we’d rather be doing other things. But the command is far richer than that, and like most commands in Scripture, it has a very practical purpose. In Deuteronomy, one of the two places we find the Sabbath command spelled out, the emphasis isn’t on religious ritual or observance, but on something far more basic: the Sabbath command is about justice. [READ Deuteronomy 5:12-15] God commands his people to take a day of rest so that other people, people who serve us, people who are different than us, people on the underclass of society like low-wage workers and resident aliens, even the beasts of burden essential to an agricultural society, can also have a day of rest. That is only just, because rest is needed for life to thrive, and God’s desire is for everyone to thrive. That’s one of several reasons why he liberated the people of Israel from slavery, from oppression, in Egypt, and now he wants his people to offer that justice, too.

The problem is, from Amos’ point of view, the well-off in Israel are angered by this principle of justice. He says that the merchants of Israel are saying to themselves, “When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?” In other words, “When will we be done with this religious obligation so we can get back to the important thing, which is making money?” Such a perspective is not only an affront to the God who set his people free and blesses them, including these merchants, but it also puts the desires of the individual businessman ahead of the legitimate needs of those on whom his wealth is built, both workers and consumers. They need this time of sanctioned rest – and all the rich of the city want to do is feed their greed.

This desire spills over into the second critique Amos has for the business leaders of Israel: they are purposefully cheating their customers. As they sell their wheat and market their grain, products that are staples, essential items, they are manipulating the currency and misrepresenting their product. Amos claims they are saying to themselves, “We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances.”[[2]](#footnote-2) These ancient units of measure and primitive modes of currency can obscure what is really going on here: these merchants are selling less product for more money in a way that hides their methods from their clients. An ephah was a unit of measure, roughly equivalent to a bushel, and “making the ephah small” was cheating the customer with less product. At the same time, they were making the shekel great; in a time before regulated currency, a shekel was simply a certain weight of silver. When the customer went to pay, the businessmen were tweaking the scales so that more silver was required. By making the ephah small and the shekel great, these wealthy merchants were cheating the customer coming and going, simply because they could get away with it.

When they did this, the merchant class of Israel was explicitly going against the commands of God, and thus explicitly choosing greed over justice. Deuteronomy 25 stipulates that anyone engaging in commerce should only have “a full and honest weight” and “a full and honest measure;” anything else is considered “abhorrent” to God.[[3]](#footnote-3) Leviticus 19 echoes this command, stating simply, “You shall not cheat in measuring length, weight, or quantity.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Being honest in business dealings, even if it affected your profit margin, was part and parcel of what it meant to be faithfully living in relationship with God…and it mattered to God. Proverbs points out that being fair and honest in buying and selling is consistent with who God is, but allowing greed to hold sway, especially at the expense of those on the bottom of society, is “an abomination” to the Lord.[[5]](#footnote-5) I’m sure the merchants of Amos’ day were saying to themselves, “All my competitors are doing this – besides, it’s just business!” But Amos, speaking on behalf of God, calls out their greed and insists it is a central part of their sin of injustice.

The third way that the businessmen of Israel are acting is perhaps the most concerning to Amos. In their inner thoughts, Amos says, the well-off of God’s people are saying, “We will…buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and sell [them] the sweepings of the wheat.”[[6]](#footnote-6) Slavery was alive and well in ancient Israel, a part of the economic reality. Slaves were not marked by ethnicity, as historical slavery was here in America, but by poverty. Debts were repaid by selling yourself or your family into servitude. And while the Scriptures acknowledge the reality of debt-slavery, nowhere is it held up as laudatory or ideal. In fact, key sections of the Law try to limit the excesses of ancient Israel’s own peculiar institution, always on the side of justice and the poor. In fact, an extension of the Sabbath principle called for all debts to be forgiven and all debt-slaves to be freed on a regular basis, even if the debt was nowhere close to being paid off. Anyone who seriously followed the commands of God would know that treating slaves justly and the poor with respect was in line with the direction of God’s will – and yet these men, these merchants, were so consumed with greed and their own advancement that they were enslaving people for something as minimal as the cost of a pair of sandals.

And wheat, that most basic of needed commodities in the ancient world? They would “cut” the wheat with the chaff, selling a nutritionally- and financially-cheap product to the people who most needed good nutrition. And they would do so right after singing songs and praying prayers to the God who had freed the people of Israel from slavery, right after worshipping the God who provided for them, right after pledging allegiance to the God whose Law they claimed to follow.

I’m sure none of this would happen today, right? I mean, we would never have businesses that take no thought of the welfare of their employees, working them harder and harder while refusing to pay them a living wage so that they can have time and space to actually rest and enjoy life, instead of working three jobs or worrying all night long about how they are going to pay the bills. We would never work the system to maximize our profits and cheat our customers. We would never take advantage of someone’s poverty for our own advancement, or support a social system or political ideology that treated the poor harshly or looked down upon those at the bottom of society. We would never jack up the prices on life-saving drugs like AIDS medication or Epi-pens, simply because it is legal. We would never allow inferior products to be marketed to those who have no choice but to buy them, because it’s all they can afford. We would never be part of anything that exploits the poor or needy, right?

Amos doesn’t have anything good to say about these men of Israel who give lip service to faith, yet live like their God’s commands are irrelevant. You see, Amos believes that “religion has to do not only with the Sabbath and the sanctuary but also with the shops and the shekel.”[[7]](#footnote-7) It’s not just business…faith still applies. And when the merchants and businessmen and participants in the economy of his day forget this – when they restrict their faith to a private faith and not a public faith that concerns every part of life – they treat the poor like trash. At the very beginning of the passage, Amos vents his full fury at them: “Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Those aren’t the words of someone who looks up to the titans of industry of his day. Those aren’t the words of someone who sees the businessmen of Israel as the job-creators that Israel’s future depends upon and shows deference to the well-off. Those are the words of a prophet speaking for God, desperately on the side of the poor because that’s the side God has chosen to be on. Those are the words of a prophet furious that the people with the power to help and not hurt, lift up and not cast down, the least of these have instead chosen to line their own pockets and relegate their action-oriented faith to fidgeting through synagogue service on the Sabbath day, already thinking of the next day’s earnings.

Amos doesn’t just vent his anger and frustration, however, and he doesn’t just call out the people who, whether consciously or unconsciously, have contributed to the dire state of the poor in the land. He also has a statement from God, one that should have sent chills down the backs of the men Amos was speaking about. “The Lord has sworn…Surely I will never forget any of their deeds.”[[9]](#footnote-9) I don’t know about you, but there are plenty of things in my past I want to remember and hope others remember – but there are also a few I hope I and, especially, everyone else forget. I hope my wife remembers all the times I bring her flowers for no reason, or spend time with her instead of watching football, but I really hope she forgets those times – and they are in every marriage – when I said something hurtful or failed to do what I had promised to do. I hope my parents remember how proud they were when I graduated from high school and college and graduate school, but I really hope they forget the times as a teenager when I yelled at them. And I really hope God remembers the mission trips I’ve been on and the people I’ve helped, but I really do wish God would forget all the many, many times I’ve failed him. Sometimes, when someone remembers what we’ve done, that’s a good thing…but other times, it can chill us to the bone to hear, “Surely I will never forget.”

I don’t know whether the people Amos was speaking about ever gave his message any attention. What I do know is that their actions – and Amos’ response to their actions – can be a warning for us. These well-off men, these people who had the resources and the know-how to really make a difference in the world, decided to let their choices be guided not by the commands of God, but by market forces and their own greed. They wanted to make their own comfort as great as possible, even if it was achieved on the backs of the poor they only thought of in terms of how much of their money and service they could take. Their object of worship wasn’t the God of the Bible, the Old Testament, the Law, but rather their own status and wealth – what older Bible translations call Mammon – and it became the idol of greed. If we’re not careful, we can get caught in the same trap, letting our self-interest overcome our awareness of the needs of others, and our greed overcome our generosity.

It doesn’t have to be that way, though. In 1995, weeks before Christmas, a fire swept through the Malden Mills textile factory. 25 workers were injured, and fourteen hundred employees were put out of work in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, plant. CEO Aaron Feuerstein received an insurance settlement of nearly $300 million, and suddenly he had some choices to make. He could close the factory and cash the check to start a lucrative and comfortable retirement. He could move the production facility to an international location that had substantially lower labor costs. Or he could choose to rebuild right there, keeping the business in Lawrence, even though it would cost about $400 million to do so.

This last option is ultimately what Mr. Feuerstein chose to do. He contracted builders to start constructing a state-of-the-art facility. Not only that, he didn’t want his employees to have to resort to unemployment insurance or their personal savings, and so he continued to pay employee salaries while the mill was reconstructed. And at first, it seemed that his compassion and commitment to the people of Lawrence paid off: product sales rose and employee productivity increased. Yet the combination of the increased debt, a volatile textile industry, and Feuerstein’s decision to stay in the United States led Malden Mills to declare bankruptcy in November 2001. Aaron Feuerstein lost his company and his position as CEO. Yet while Mr. Feuerstein did not personally profit in the long-term, he continued to believe he had done the right thing, and the people of Lawrence, Massachusetts, consider him a hero. Why? Because the company continued, operating today as Polartec. It remains the largest employer in the community, putting food on the tables and paying for the college educations and medical expenses of hundreds of families.

By the standards of today’s hard-nosed world of corporate commerce, Aaron Feuerstein made the worst decision possible. Yet he made a choice based not on greed, but on faith, in his case a Jewish faith. He would later tell an interviewer, “You are not permitted to oppress the working man, because he’s poor and he’s needy, amongst your brethren and amongst the non-Jew in your community.”[[10]](#footnote-10) That understanding of good and bad, right and wrong, led Aaron Feuerstein to invest the $300 million from his insurance settlement, and borrow $100 million more, to build a worker- and environmentally-friendly plant. And while he ultimately did not make all the money he could – in fact, his company eventually had to declare bankruptcy – Mr. Feuerstein made the business decision he believed was ultimately the best for everyone, a decision he made based on his faith.

It can be tempting for any of us to believe that our faith is merely religious ritual, confined to a few observances and habits that “check off the box” and get us right with God. Coming to worship, praying some prayers, reading the Bible each day, participating in the Lord’s Supper, even writing a tithe check – all of these can become nothing more than a religious routine that leaves little mark on our lives. We can divide our lives into separate compartments – religion here, family here, business here – and pretend like the compartments have no claim on each other. It can be easy to fall into the trap that the targets of Amos’ anger fell into: to believe that a few hours of religious observance can relieve us of the obligation to actually live lives guided by God’s commands. We can make our decisions based on our own greed and self-interest. But we don’t have to. Instead, we can choose to be like Truett Cathy and Aaron Feuerstein and thousands of other faithful people of God through the ages: we can make our choices in every area of life based on faith.

In the same interview, Aaron Feuerstein was asked how he wanted to be remembered, what he wanted written on his tombstone. His response: “Hopefully it’ll be, ‘He done his darndest.’ You know, that I didn’t give up, and I tried to do the right thing.”[[11]](#footnote-11) That’s the hope of someone who took Amos’ warning to heart – and we can have that hope, as well, if we form our minds and our hearts to choose, not based on our own best interest or opinion or greed, but on the commands of God and the teachings of Christ. When we do, we will find that we won’t have to fear God remembering our deeds – we can be proud of what we have done. How do we want God to remember us? Let us pray.

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue\_law#United\_States [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Amos 8:5b [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deuteronomy 25:15-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Leviticus 19:35 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Proverbs 20:10, 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Amos 8:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Limburg, Interpretation, 121 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amos 8:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Amos 8:7 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Willard, 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Willard 213 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)