

MEASURE

Introduction

We are masters at measurement! Every where we turn culture has us measuring ourselves and one another in ways that we don't ever even stop to think about. We use these measurements unconsciously to make determinations about things and people—many times resulting in value judgments. We have preferences, we choose favorites all based on comparison. But what are the means by which we compare all of these things? Why do we choose one thing over another?

Simply put, God doesn't play favorites. Whether His people or not, he does not make allowances for any one person that he does not make for another. Through our nearsighted perspective, we are conditioned to think that God has our preferences, reacts in the way we do, and favors those things we favor.

We often go about our lives comparing ourselves and trying to determine whether or not we measure up. We don't live in a plumb-line culture. In our world, we always measure by comparison. We don't like absolute standards. We can always find someone greedier. But what are we using for our means of comparison? Are we looking to our neighbors, friends and family and thinking "Well, in comparison I'm doing pretty well, I have it together." In the face of our evasion, God sets a standard radically different from the constantly shifting culture we live in. We will identify God's unchanging standard for measuring our life.

God is particularly interested in how we measure up concerning our treatment of the poor. Through Amos we will discover that the poor may not be who we think they are; we may not be measuring up to standard in the way we thought we were and; we may need to make some drastic shifts in perspective in order to build ourselves and communities the way God intended.

The Setup

Read Amos 1-3

Look at the simple boldness of Amos. Here was a shepherd who was not a trained prophet, yet was burdened with the task of delivering a prophetic message. In fact his words were reported as conspiracy to the King of Israel. How would any of us react if we were to be burdened with a message likely unwelcome by our contemporaries?

Through these first couple of chapters, God sends Amos on a journey throughout the region surrounding Israel delivering the news of God's judgments. As the Israelites heard it for the first time this must have been a welcome message. God was finally going to take action against their enemies. They had pushed him too far. The Israelites must have reveled as God listed off the sins for which their enemies would be punished. To have messed up so badly, what else could they expect from such a great and wonderful God? How much God's judgment of the evil He was seeing must have felt like Judah and company getting their just rewards.

Just as Israel must have been getting ready to celebrate, Amos continues with news of another judgment. Israel will be justly judged as well. The Israelites had seen themselves in a privileged position, but God is impartial.

Israel was not chosen because God had a preference for them but because He had *purpose* for them in His eternal plan. What a shock this must have been to a people who thought that being chosen meant preferential treatment!

Amos was a farmer from the country of Judah. He was given a vision by God of the future and was instructed to take that vision north to Israel. The book of Amos details the vision he prophesized to the Israelites. At this time, Israel and Judah were divided into separate countries. The people in Israel had become complacent – their religion was just for show. They worshipped idols and oppressed the poor. The book of Amos is about God’s future judgment for Israel and also the future hope that God would restore them once again.

Opener

Can you remember a time when you were small where someone, probably not a friend, very likely a sibling, got into trouble and was punished for something they did to you? How did you feel when you heard that they were going to “get it!” Can you remember an experience where you were excited about a punishment coming to someone who you thought “deserved it” but were then included in the punishment yourself for your part in the incident? How did you feel?

Read Amos 1:3-2:16

- Through the first chapter of Amos, God gives a laundry list of the sins of each of the nations surrounding Judah and Israel and the justice He intended to dole out. How might the people of Israel have felt, hearing God’s judgments against their enemies?
- What were some of the sins God highlights in his message to Amos in this chapter long litany?
- Are any of the sins God catalogues in this first chapter analogous to things our culture experiences today? Give some examples of what these sins may look like in contemporary culture.
- In chapter 2:4-5 Amos proclaims God’s judgment against Judah, Israel’s neighbor. How would Amos have felt telling the Israelites about the impending judgment against their neighbors? What might their response to Amos have been?
- If asked to deliver a message, what would be your reaction to bringing a message as frightening and damning to your neighbors and co-workers as the one Amos brought to his people?
- As a shepherd and fig grower, it certainly wasn’t in Amos’ training to prophesy God’s word. How did he respond to God’s call to do something so different from what his occupation may have prepared him?

- What is your reaction when you are confronted with doing something that is drastically different from what you perceive as your “training?”
- What does God’s choice in using Amos tell us about God?
- Does God’s choice in using Amos tell us anything about our own role in building His Kingdom? What?
- WHAMMO!! Midway through chapter 2, Amos’s prophecy suddenly changes gears. It’s the Israelites’ turn. What do you imagine the Israelites’ reaction to the first sentence of verse 6 was?
- What were some of the sins God listed against Israel?

I’m reminded of a story that a friend once shared with me. It happened in New York City, during a summer rush hour on the subway. People jammed the subway cars as the train moved out of the station, and one man—the last man to board—was squeezed in against the door, facing outward. As the subway train moved away from the station the walls of the tunnel passed before his eyes, moving faster and faster. The train swayed and bumped. The car was hot and stuffy and smelled a little rank. The man realized that he felt sick—and the further the train went, the sicker he felt.

Finally, the train pulled into the next stop, the door opened—and the man on the train vomited all over an unfortunate man who happened to be standing on the platform waiting to board the train. For several seconds, as the doors stood open, nobody moved. The sick man, the people on the train behind him, the unfortunate man on the platform, the others on the platform—everyone stood still and stared in horror at what had just taken place.

Then the doors of the subway car suddenly closed and the train began to move out of the station. Looking down at the mess that covered his suit, the man on the platform wailed, “Why me?!”

If we see ourselves in some privileged position with God, then that is a reasonable question: “Why me?” But if God is completely impartial, then a more reasonable question emerges: “Why not me?”

—Ray C. Stedman, *Adventuring through the Bible*

- When was the last time you had a “why me?” reaction to some circumstance? Would your reaction to the situation have been different if you had thought to yourself, “why not me?”
- Why do you think that we have such an elitist perspective when bad things happen to us or around us?

- Does God's justice as it's described in Amos give you a sense of comfort or a sense of fear? Is it the reaction you would expect to have, given we are talking about fairness in misfortune, the same as if we were talking about fairness in fortune?
- God had a purpose for the Israelites; He chose them. If we think of ourselves as Christ followers, in what ways might we be separating ourselves out from all others around us? Are we assuming a role of preference or one of purpose? How might making that determination for ourselves affect our actions toward others?
- In chapter 2 verses 9-11 God reminds his people that he has been faithful. What has God done for the Israelites?
- God was particularly displeased with the Israelites treatment of the poor. As we think of this particular fault, how do we evaluate ourselves?
- What are some areas of your life in which God has been faithful in the past? Do you always remember his faithfulness or are you prone to forgetfulness?
- Do any of the items included in the list of offenses Amos proclaimed ring true for us today? Which ones?
- Are there any ways in which you are doing things now that show forgetfulness on your part?
- How might we try to rationalize our behavior toward the poor if we were questioned by God?
- How can remembering God's faithfulness help us to stay on track in our walk with him?
- If we were to be weighed and measured today, would we be found wanting? Who or what is the standard for measuring our faithfulness?
- Chapter 3 details how God always sends a warning before punishment. The list is an extended example of basic cause and effect. Is God warning us today about the sin in our lives? How? After looking at how God handled the Israelites, what can we expect as we examine our own lifestyles?
- What sin in our lives do we need to address? Are there areas in which we have wandered from God?

The Measure of Real Spirituality

Read Deuteronomy 24:12-22, Proverbs 19:17 & Psalm 68:5

Introduction

God is seeking balance in our lives. He obviously cares about our worship, our learning from His word and sharing life together. But that isn't the end of true spirituality. When we truly worship God, our hearts are captured by the things that matter to God. . . and God cares about the poor, the oppressed and the outcast. Amos has much to teach us about how we can begin to act in ways that will bring justice for those who are marginalized in our culture.

The Bible places great emphasis on assisting the poor and helpless, especially orphans, widows, and the handicapped. To neglect them is a sin. In Israelite society, no paid work was available to women; thus, a widow and her children had no livelihood. Neither was there work for the seriously handicapped in this nation of farmers and shepherds. The poor were to be helped without charging any interest. Individual and family responsibility for the poor was crucial since there was no government aid. Financially secure families were responsible to help and house those in need. Many times we do nothing for not because we are overwhelmed by the size of the problem and don't know where to begin, but because we simply fail to look around us and see the needs. God doesn't expect us to neglect our families while providing for others. He does, however, expect that when we see an individual need, we will reach out with whatever help we can offer, including hospitality.

In the Old Testament, there were two means to help the poor. The first was through the gleaning laws listed in Leviticus 19:9-10 "*When you harvest the crops of your land, do not harvest the grain along the edges of your fields, and do not pick up what the harvesters drop. It is the same with your grape crop—do not strip every last bunch of grapes from the vines, and do not pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. Leave them for the poor and the foreigners living among you. I am the Lord your God.*" and Deuteronomy 24:19-22, "When you are harvesting your crops and forget to bring in a bundle of grain from your field, don't go back to get it. Leave it for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. Then the Lord your God will bless you in all you do. When you beat the olives from your olive trees, don't go over the boughs twice. Leave the remaining olives for the foreigners, orphans, and widows. When you gather the grapes in your vineyard, don't glean the vines after they are picked. Leave the remaining grapes for the foreigners, orphans, and widows." As farmers reaped their crops, they would leave the corners of their fields un-harvested, and anything that fell to the ground was left for the poor.

The second method used to help the poor was the tithe. In Leviticus 27:30 we find that the tithe provided funds both for the church and for the poor. The funds were distributed by the priests to those who were truly needy. "*One tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees belongs to the Lord and must be set apart to him as holy.*"

²²⁻²⁴ "*Don't mistreat widows or orphans. If you do and they cry out to me, you can be sure I'll take them most*

seriously; I'll show my anger and come raging among you with the sword, and your wives will end up widows and your children orphans.

²⁵ *"If you lend money to my people, to any of the down-and-out among you, don't come down hard on them and gouge them with interest.*

²⁶⁻²⁷ *"If you take your neighbor's coat as security, give it back before night-fall; it may be your neighbor's only covering—what else does the person have to sleep in? And if I hear the neighbor crying out from the cold, I'll step in—I'm compassionate. —Exodus 22:22-27 (The Message)*

²⁵ *I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread. —Psalm 37:25*

- Who are those people our culture sets aside?
- What is our culture's definition of poor?
- What is your honest reaction to those our culture defines as "poor?"
- Look closely at what Deuteronomy says about the "poor." Who are they?
- What do the "poor" as defined in Deuteronomy all have in common? Does this create a different picture of who we think of as the poor?
- What does our culture urge us to do regarding the poor?
- How does what Deuteronomy instructs differ from what our culture urges?
- Do the methods our culture employs to aid the poor work? Do they work well?
- How might the landscape look different if we were to act toward one another as the above verses suggest?

²⁸ *“At the end of every third year, bring the entire tithe of that year’s harvest and store it in the nearest town.*
²⁹ *Give it to the Levites, who will receive no allotment of land among you, as well as to the foreigners living among you, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, so they can eat and be satisfied. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all your work.—Deuteronomy 14:28-29*

Levites were a tribe of priests descended from Levi, who were charged with serving the spiritual needs of the other tribes of Israel. With only enough land for their cattle and 48 cities set aside for them, God Himself was to be their inheritance. The Levites were to be the recipients of the tithes due to God. Of these tithes, the Levites were then instructed to give a tithe to the Priests.

The Bible supports an organized system of caring for the poor. God told his people to use their tithe every third year for those who were hungry, or poor. These regulations were designed to prevent the country from sinking under crushing poverty and oppression. It was everyone’s responsibility to care for those less fortunate. Families were to help other family members, and towns were to help members of their community. National laws protected the rights of the poor, but helping the poor was also an active part of religious life. God counts on believers to provide for the needy, and we should use what God has given us to aid those less fortunate. Look beyond your regular giving and think of ways to help the needy. This will help you show your regard for god as Creator of all people, share God’s goodness with others and draw them to him. It is a practical and essential way to make faith work in everyday life.

“If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and He will repay you!” —Proverbs 19:17

- What would your definition of “true spirituality” be? What things or people have influenced your understanding of what this might mean?
- What do the verses in Deuteronomy say about the way we should treat the poor?
- How can the welfare methods described in these verses be applied to today?
- Can the methods described in Deuteronomy work in our culture today with the way we have set up our social services systems? In what way may the social service systems work against the kind of social justice we see in the verses highlighted throughout this study?
- How can we act so as to bring justice to those who are marginalized (the poor, oppressed, outcast) in our society today? What are some concrete steps we can take?

⁵ You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance, bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind. You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes. Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the Lord? ⁶ No, this is the kind of fasting I want: Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you. Let the oppressed go free, and remove chains that bind people. Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless. Give clothes to those who need them and do not hide from the relatives who need your help. —Isaiah 58:5-6

- Looking at the verses in Proverbs and Psalms, who cares about the poor? Who will repay us if we help the poor? As Christ followers, what attitude should we adopt toward the poor?
- Why does God care so much about the poor?
- Why do you suppose that foreigners are included in those God groups as the “poor?” What do they have in common with the Israelites who are receiving the message from Amos?

The Measure of Greed and True Worth

Read Amos 2:6-8, 3:15 & 4

Introduction

Amos hits the people of Israel right where they live. He lets them know that God sees their greed and devaluation of human life. To many of these people a human life was worth as much as a pair of Nike or Birkenstock shoes.

²⁹*What is the price of two sparrows—one copper coin? But not a single sparrow can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it.* ³⁰*And the very hairs on your head are all numbered.* —Matthew 10:29-30

We live in a society that encourages us to live like cows, always consuming more. The deeper problem for Israel is that they made no connection between their relationship with God and their treatment of the poor. God wants to transform our way of life and teach us generosity towards the marginalized and needy.

¹⁰*For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And some people, craving money, have wandered from the true faith and pierced themselves with many sorrows.*

- Timothy 6:10

³*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.*
Philippians 2:3

- What is really at the root of comparing ourselves to others?
- In what ways do these comparisons affect where we find worth in people or things?
- On what things do we spend our money?
- What does how we use our money say about who we are?
- Does how we use our money build other people or tear them down?

⁵ *These people always cause trouble. Their minds are corrupt, and they have turned their backs on the truth. To them, a show of godliness is just a way to become wealthy.*

1 Timothy 6:5

- If someone were to look around our homes at the things on which we have spent our money, to what conclusions would they come about who we are and what we value?
- Would how we use our money on a day to day basis tell someone looking in from the outside that Christ was at the center of our lives?
- How do we measure up on the greed scale compared to those around us?
- Is this a reliable, stable means of evaluating ourselves and our attitudes?
- What about if we measure ourselves against God's standard? Is that a reliable standard for measurement? Is it a measure that changes?
- Are we valuing the things that God values?
- In what ways does our culture push us to value things over people or relationships?
- What are the ways in which our culture specifically persuades us to place higher value on those who have more things?
- As we look at our response to those in need around us, what do we use as the standard for measuring our attitudes?

The Measure of Authentic Worship

Read Amos 5:21-24

Introduction

Amos is often referred to as the prophet of social justice, demanding that people deal justly and compassionately with one another. God is disturbed by social injustices and Amos tells Israel very plainly how to deal with them.

“⁴This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live’ –Amos 5:4

“⁶Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the house of Joseph like a fire.” –Amos 5:6

Think of the goals of the games we play. Games like Monopoly™ and Risk™. In the face of gaining wealth and power, God has a very different vision for us to see. Our worship and our lives cannot be separated. Worship should occupy the core of our lives and not just a few minutes once a week. We, too, can worship at any time if we stay aware of God’s presence and guidance in all situations and if we maintain an attitude of serving him. Building our lives around the worship of God instead of making it just another activity in a busy schedule would possibly cause us to approach the cause of the needy and oppressed in a very different way from how our culture has programmed us. Injustice and authentic worship cannot coexist in the life of a Christ follower.

- Do you notice that God has used the phrase, “*your religious festivals?*” Do you find it interesting that He is not taking ownership of the people’s worship? Why do you think that is?
- What has become of their worship? Do you ever find yourself in this same kind of scenario?
- How can you be sure that your worship is authentic?
- What is your vision of worship? Does your life reflect your Sunday behavior?
- Where do your allegiances lie during the week?

- How long is it possible to lead a double life? Do you believe that God can see the difference? Which life is the most important to Him?
- How can you be sure that your life and your worship are two in one?
- Are you willing to give over your life as a form of worship to God?
- What does God want from us? How does He want us to reflect Him?
- How can you combine your worship and your everyday life? How can you ensure that you will stay on track?