

## **“A Prophetic Challenge” based on Amos 8, Colossians 1:15-28**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on July 20, 2025, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

At the start of the 8th Century BC, the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah were winners. Both nations had successful kings who expanded the territories of their kingdoms to reclaim lost land. They had expanded trade with the surrounding nations as the crossroads between major empires. They had created tremendous wealth.

These kings outwardly professed their faith in the God of Israel, the Lord, or YHWH. They surrounded themselves with prophets and priests who were first, and foremost, loyal to the kings. They likely saw their success as a blessing from the Lord. However, today, we have the help of historical hindsight, and we have the writings of prophets speaking for the Lord. We know the exile is coming soon. We know this prosperity was short lived. We know the kings of both Israel and Judah were judged to be unfaithful to the Lord.

Yet at the same time, I do really and honestly think that these kings thought they were faithful to the Lord. At least, I want to give them the benefit of the doubt to say they likely thought they were at least checking the right boxes and performing the right religious functions to keep the Lord on their side. After all, they had proof they were doing well. They enjoyed success in war, success in trade, and saw rising wealth.

Today, we have the benefit of mass printed bibles that we can all read, so we might rightly wonder how they could possibly think they were being faithful, especially since it seems as though their mistakes were pretty obvious. For instance, one example would be that Israel had two major temples. One was in the north in Dan, and one was in Bethel, closer to the border with Judah. These temples represented the Lord with a golden bull. The writers mockingly call the idols ‘golden calves,’ as ‘baby gods,’ but nonetheless, it seems obvious to us that this is a flagrant violation of God’s commandment against idol worship.

It’s easy for us to sit in judgement, but they would have been called naïve in that time and place, if they built a great temple which did not have an image for the people to worship. What’s more, the bull was a revered symbol for other deities, including Baal. So then if the Lord was going to be replacing Baal in all things, as they believed, shouldn’t the Lord also claim the image people used for Baal? After all, the first time we see the golden calf, we often overlook that the Israelites said, “This is the Lord, who led us out of Egypt.”

So, before we judge the Israelites and Judahites too harshly, we do the same thing today. When someone “successful” professes faith in Jesus, it tempts us to call this success a “blessing.” Then, in turn, we’re tempted to give them spiritual authority. But the prophets challenge us to instead think critically about things like success. They challenge us to discern how this success is obtained and who benefits from this “success.” If this success comes at the expense of the poor and needy, those of the lowest status, the least powerful and often socially outcast, then as we heard from Amos, all the religious acts of devotion, ultimately add up to nothing before God.

Again, in the time of Amos at the start of the 8th Century BC, Israel and Judah had power on the world stage through trade at the crossroads between empires. They had reclaimed territories that had been lost to surrounding nations in previous wars, and the kings, those closest to power, and

religious leaders all profited. However, all of this excess did not reach the people below. Through the prophet Amos, the Lord warns the powerful that comfort is not a sign of God's endorsement. The prophet warns that all of their "winnings," do not mean they worship God correctly.

Yet again, here we find scripture pointing to the importance of loving our neighbors as the central way in which we demonstrate our love for God and our faithfulness to God. In the ancient world, most religious practices were openly transactional. They were scientific even – do this and get this result. Keep doing it that way until you don't get the result, then make a change.

The average person in Egypt, Assyria or Babylon, and yes, in Greece or Rome, would have viewed their religious practices and devotions as the way you might earn a god's favor. You might make a personal vow of self-sacrifice, or a public sacrifice of an animal or another offering. In keeping this ritual, you demonstrate your devotion to a particular god and hope to gain your reward.

As Christians, when we talk about being saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ, we emphasize that our relationship with the Lord is not supposed to be transactional. This is true for us, but sometimes we forget that it was also true for the ancient Israelites as well. What Amos and the prophets criticize is the use of the sacrificial system as a transaction to gain favor with the Lord and authority for exploiting others. No matter how many animals you sacrifice on God's altars, the prophets tell us, whether or not you are sacrificing in the right way, the Lord will not forget how you treated others.

Now, both Kings and Chronicles emphasize that Israel and Judah's worship was done wrong. These books point out the problems with the golden calves and competing temples. They point out how the kings, those closest to power, and the religious leaders all strayed from the Lord. Very few on the list of leaders do not get hit with the description of having done evil before the Lord. They all stray from the God of Israel, who freed them from Egypt.

You may recall the story of Elijah denouncing the worship of Baal, which we read in mid-June. Here we are in our reading today, 200 years later, and problems remain. Nominally, it seems the powers of Israel claim to be worshipping the Lord, and not Baal. If you want proof of this, in the chapter before, the priest at Bethel who rejects Amos and asks him to leave – his name is Amaziah. That "iah" at the end, means he is a worshiper of the Lord because that is a part of the divine name within his name. Amaziah means "the strength of the Lord (YHWH)."

So, what we have in the historical books of the bible along with the prophets is the two sides of the same coin. It is loving God with all your heart, mind and strength, and loving your neighbor as yourself – the great commandment. To love God rightly is to know who God really is and what God desires not just from us, but for us, is to return this love by our love for one another.

The Lord is not like the pagan gods waiting for us to prove ourselves and get stuff from us, before we get stuff from our God. No, the Lord called Abraham first. The Lord freed the Israelites from Egypt first. The Lord always acts first, demonstrating love, not for the sake of the Lord. God did not need to become human in Jesus to live as we live in our flesh, then die, rise, and ascend for us.

God would have been just fine without that. Yet, God loves us so much that this is what God did in Christ. In fact, the Lord comes to us even today while we are still sinners, so that we might be

empowered by God's love for us to share that love in the world around us. This good news empowers us with the Holy Spirit, both in and among us. We are likewise empowered by the promise of eternal life so that we might have no fear and do the right thing.

Beloved, the believers in Baal made offerings to meet the needs of Baal and gain their god's favor and their own success. However, right belief in the Lord meant believing that you were chosen by the Lord. Right belief meant you would be empowered by the Lord to be a light to all nations, revealing the power of the Lord in how you live and how you treat others. Do you see the difference?

Paul tells us in our reading from Colossians that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. In him, the one who is the eternal Son, all things were created, we see who the Lord our God is, and Jesus died for us, and he rose for us. All the fullness of God was in Jesus, and he reconciles all things to God. He is creating peace through his blood on the cross. None of us will be perfect and we all make mistakes, but we can continue to come to him and seek to do better.

However, when we see God as a being to manipulate for favors, then we are what Paul describes as foreigners and hostile in our thoughts by evil acts. Yet, even if we are that way, Jesus still died for us in his human body, his flesh, and by his death, we are reconciled and presented to God, as holy, unblemished, and unaccused.

We must remain established in this good news. We shouldn't let ourselves get dislodged or moved away. Yet, you know what, very soon after the Exodus, the Israelites in a comically short time period lost sight of what the Lord had done for them. However, they kept being drawn back. We, likewise, are also tempted to lose sight of the mystery, which is now among all nations. Christ came for all people, the people of every nation every ethnicity, every language, and all are called to this good news of Christ being available to us, and to live in us.

Now that we have seen quickly how the Hebrew scriptures and especially the prophets here, line up with good news of Jesus and how Paul presents it to us, I want us to quickly look at the warnings the Lord gives to Amos of Israel's coming exile. These warnings are not directly aimed at us. They are fulfilled in the exile, but they demonstrate for us how we might imagine the priorities of the Lord in how we conduct ourselves and worship today.

There are many who still present God to us as a transactional deity. They portray a God we need to appease to gain the benefits we want. Many are using this to take advantage of others. Like the Judahites and Israelites of Amos's day, I will give them the benefit of the doubt, and trust that they think they are righteous.

But the truth is that there are many who see God and a personal relationship with God as a means to an end. They see it as an object, and as something to be manipulated. If you have enough faith, or the right kind of faith, you can get whatever you want: health, wealth, power, or anything else. In this way, many of our fellow Christians make the Lord into that golden calf once again. They believe they are professing the same Christ that the church has professed for 2,000 years, and point to their wealth, popularity, and power as proof. They call this proof that they are holy, or even anointed by God. (Be wary of that because anointed is *'christos'* and Jesus warns that many false leaders will say they are the Christ, meaning the *'anointed'* or *'christos.'*)

Like the Kings of Israel and Judah in the 8th Century, they believe they are doing right for the Lord, even as they directly go against, it seems, some of the most basic teachings of the faith. I am no prophet and do not claim that mantle, but Amos is. And the Lord speaks a warning to us through Amos: "Be wary of those who use the Lord to seek their own gain. Be wary of those who trample on the needy, the lowly, the lowest status, and those who only make the poor of the land fail or let them be ruined. Be cautious of those who fulfill their religious duties, Only in order to resume commerce and trade."

We must be wary of those who justify taking advantage of others. We must be wary of those who would making the ephah small, which means to undersell or make the shekel large, which means to overcharge. We must be wary of those who bend the scales by deceit, is to lure you into buying under false pretenses, even the false pretenses that only they can deliver what God promises.

Christ alone is our savior, but too many are trying to acquire the poor for silver in our age, and trading the needy, the least among us, for a modest gain – like a pair of sandals. Yes, sandals are important in that day, but Amos also talks of people lounging on ivory couches, so to be traded for a pair of sandals seems like a modest gain. Then there are those that sell sweepings, or chaff, as actual grain, and justifying by saying, "It's just business." What is worst of all is that this all happens, by people who are trading on our Christian faith.

Sisters and brothers, these words sound difficult, and they are. But they should also be a comfort to us because we can trust that we are loved by God. Paul trusted this even in his suffering, which he counted as a blessing. We can trust that God's love is not conditional. God's love is not given to us as a reward for something we have done. No, God's love is given to us so that we can share it.

We can trust that God's justice is to humble the proud and raise up the lowly. We can be confident in God's love to do what is right by doing what we can to love our neighbors, unconditionally, as God loves us, and do this especially those in most need of assistance.

Power, popularity and prosperity are not proof of God's blessing. But they are things that if we are fortunate enough to have them, we can use them as tools to be God's image for others in the world around us. We can share what we have. We can love as God loves us. We can seek reconciliation.

Hear the warning and the prophetic challenge that Amos gives us. See also what Paul has given us about the nature of Christ, and what it means for us to live with Christ in us. Know that you are loved first by God, upfront, no matter what and you do not need to earn God's favor. Also, know that this love and this favor have been given to you so that others might know God's love for them through you, and come to find Christ in his glory in and through you.

Beloved, it's a beautiful thing that we are a growing church. It is nice to see new faces consistently, and it's nice to have good attendance, lots of people at events. It's all a joyful thing. However, it's not necessarily a sign that we are doing things right before God. No, we know we are doing things right when we are mindful of the community around us and are active in it to be a faithful presence for God to help the least among us. That is our calling, and I am grateful to be walking among you and knowing how active you are. But let us not rest on our laurels and may we always seek to be Christ's presence in the world around us. Amen.