***A RECKONING FOR THE RICH***

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Texts: Amos 6:1, 4-7 and Luke 16:19-31

Alas for those who are at ease and those who feel secure! Alas for those who lie comfortably on their couches and eat and drink well! Alas for those who have time to sing idle songs! Alas for the notables of the nations! Alas! Really? There are a whole lot of folks who would like to be so alas-ed – to live secure and at ease, eating and drinking and making merry! There must be a mistranslation from the Hebrew in these verses from Amos. Isn’t the word really “blessed”? Blessed are you who are at ease and feel secure! Blessed are you who lie comfortably on your couches and eat and drink well! Blessed are you who have time to relax and sing idle songs! Isn’t this the life to which we aspire – a life of comfort and ease fulfilling the suggestion of the writer in Ecclesiastes:

*There is nothing better than to be happy and enjoy yourself as long as you live; moreover, it is God’ gift that all should eat and drink and be merry!*

Aren’t these the ones who are *blessed* rather than those for whom Amos cries, “Alas!”?

I’ve checked the Hebrew, and the translation is not in error. These are indeed those for whom Amos despairs, because while they live comfortably and at ease, they are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph, says Amos. Their problem is not that they live comfortably; there are plenty of places in Scripture that commend such comforts as blessings from God. Their problem is that they live comfortably without regard for the suffering around them and the impending doom descending upon them. They are oblivious to it all! Maybe they earned their wealth through diligent work, maybe they invested wisely, maybe they inherited it, maybe they hit the lottery! Amos doesn’t say and it really doesn’t matter, for the indictment is not how they earned their wealth or even that they are wealthy; the indictment is that they are so focused upon themselves and the enjoyment of their comforts, that they are not moved by the suffering of their neighbors. In the words of biblical scholar Donald Gowan:

*Luxury is a problem when it is gained at the expense of others’ misery and when it deadens the mind and the senses to responsibility.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable, the wealthy in Israel were indeed deadened to any sense of responsibility for those around them; they were blind to the suffering of those who lay right outside their gates and ignored their anguished cries! Like the Pharisees to whom Jesus spoke, pious leaders who were “lovers of money” according to Luke, their priorities were all out of whack.

According to Amos there are consequences for such skewed priorities. Those who enjoyed a secure and comfortable life while their neighbors suffered would themselves suffer as the first to be led away into exile. “*The revelry of the loungers shall pass away*,” Amos warned. Those who thought they could safely ignore the problems of the world would soon find themselves at the center of them; their wealth would not safeguard them from that fate. In the parable, Jesus too warns of the dire future that awaits the wealthy who disregard the needs of the poor at their gates. At his death, the rich man found himself in agony in Hades while poor Lazarus who had suffered so in life, found himself at the side of Abraham. Both passages echo the warnings of Jesus to the crowd in the Sermon on the Plain:

*Woe to you who are rich,*

*for you have received your consolation.*

*Woe to you who are full now,*

*for you will be hungry*

*Woe to you who are laughing now,*

*for you will mourn and weep*. (LK 6:24-25)

In the third stanza of his great hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, Harry Emerson Fosdick offers this prayer:

*Shame our wanton selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.*

*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss Thy kingdom’s goal.*

Rich in things and poor in soul – that might well describe the wealthy to whom Amos spoke or the rich man in Jesus’ parable. They had it all by society’s standards, but were poor in soul. They lacked compassion and love,

for, says Amos, they were not grieved over the ruin of Joseph,

for, says Jesus, *at the rich man’s gate lay Lazarus, a poor man covered with*

*sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table*.

Not in some distant land or on the other side of the city or in some back alley, but at the rich man’s own gate lay poor, sick Lazarus; and the rich man never saw him, never stopped to help, never shared with him the crumbs from his table, for the rich man’s goal was to be rich in things, to eat, drink, and be merry – the same goal shared by the wealthy of whom Amos spoke, those who ate, drank, sang their idle songs, and reveled as their neighbors suffered. Such wealth and revelry are not the goals of the kingdom of God!

This week some of you may have read of the decision by Yvon Chouinard, founder of the outdoor apparel brand Patagonia, to give away his company – valued at $3 billion – to support efforts to protect the Earth by combating climate change and protecting undeveloped land around the world. He didn’t just make a donation; he gave away the whole company he had started in order to address an existential threat to people all over the world. Politicians and many of us make promises about addressing climate change but demonstrate little will to make real changes toward addressing it. But Mr. Chouinard has literally put his money where his values are. In an op-ed article about his decision, Christine Emba writes:

*It's an unusual move – exceptional really. And the exception highlights an unhealthy reality of our wealth obsessed, capitalist system: It often requires more intention and effort to give away money than to passively amass billions. Why is unloading a fortune so unusual, in a country that has minted 50 new billionaires in the past year alone?*[[2]](#endnote-2)

Why indeed? With so many problems to be addressed in our community, nation, and world – climate change, homelessness, mental health, food insecurity, wars, poverty, refugees, pandemics, threats to our democracy – why are there so few people deeply concerned about them, concerned enough to tear themselves away from their idle pursuits and put their money, time, and talents where the needs are?

Just this week Puerto Rico was smashed by a hurricane, mass graves were discovered in a Ukrainian city after the retreat of Russian soldiers, and 77 migrants died when their boat sank off the coast of Syria; locally there has been a run on SACRA resources, affordable housing continues to be a problem without a solution in sight, and the mental health system is strained to the breaking point. How many of those issues were the topic of your conversations over dinner? Did any of those who are suffering find their way into your prayers? Did you think of them and their needs at all, beyond hearing about them in the news or reading about them online? Or were they merely a distraction from the other things weighing on your mind – what to have for dinner, an upcoming football game, the schedule for Mischief and Magic, the Presidents Cup, tonight’s kickball game? That is not to say that we are to follow the old Puritan claim: *If it feels good, it must be wrong*! But it is to say that we dare not be so enamored with our own comforts and joys and recreation that we ignore the needs of our neighbors near and far. We should mourn with those who mourn, be righteously angry with those who are righteously angry, weep with those who weep, celebrate with those who celebrate, and strive to make this world we share with them all a better place.

In his book *The Color of Compromise*, Jemar Tisby traces the role of the church and Christians in perpetuating racism across our nation’s history. It is a sobering read; it is painful to read of Christians actively supporting slavery or advocating for racist policies, but it is also hard to read of the benign neglect offered by many white Christians along the way as their Black neighbors suffered. Tisby writes:

*The failure of many Christians in the South and across the nation to decisively oppose the racism in their families, communities, and even in their own churches provided fertile soil for the seeds of hatred to grow. The refusal to act in the midst of injustice is itself an act of injustice. Indifference to oppression perpetuates oppression.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

There could have been a footnote there – *See Amos 6 or Jesus’ parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* – for they are singing the same song! We who are so blessed have not just an opportunity but a responsibility to take note of the needs of our neighbors and respond to them. Nero famously fiddled while Rome burned; we dare not join him in fiddling around while fires are popping up – literally and figuratively – all around us!

Our riches are gifts of God to be used for God’s good purposes – to meet the needs of our neighbors in need; to be instruments of God’s justice, mercy, and grace; to proclaim God’s good news in word and in deed; for in sharing our good gifts we store up divine treasures that far exceed all the riches that are within human grasp. The rich man in the parable didn’t figure that out until it was too late. And when he suggested that Abraham send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers so that they might not meet a similar fate, Abraham said:

*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*.

We have Moses, we have Amos and the prophets, we have Jesus who rose from the dead – the one who told this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. What then will it take for you to listen to them? What will it take for you to strive harder to be rich in soul than in things? What will it take for you to help the Lazarus at your gate – for there are a host of them gathered there in need of your help? “*What then will it take?”* asks the Lord. Amen

1. Donald Gowan in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol.VII, “Amos”, Abingdon Press: 1996, p.400 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Christine Emba, “Finally, a billionaire wiling to smack back at capitalism”, *The Washington Post*, September 18, 2022, p.A27 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, Zondervan:2019, pp.14-15 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)