***RICH IN THINGS OR IN SOUL?***

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September 21, 2025

Texts: Amos 8:4-12 and Luke 16:10-13

There was a time, long ago, when communities were small enough and resources scarce enough that all that was hunted or harvested was shared with the whole community so that all were housed and clothed and fed with little left over. As cultivation techniques improved and communities grew and became more established, opportunities for specialization and trade developed; simple economies became more complex, and with that complexity came problems – among them: a divide among the haves and the have-nots. We see this at play in this passage from Amos, the prophet who lived sometime around 750 BCE, though the final form of the biblical book bearing his name may have taken shape as late as 200 years later. The observations and critiques are not those of Amos; they are those of the Lord. Amos is just the messenger.

What the Lord observed – and I am sure this will be highly offensive and unimaginable to many of you – is that amassing wealth had become the driving force in the lives of many of the people. Those in the marketplace were so intent on making money that they could barely wait for the sabbath and holy days to end so that they could get back to their business. The business was not always on the up and up. They cheated their customers by having two sets of weights – one heavy and one light – that guaranteed a more favorable exchange than that to which a fair deal would entitle them. In archaeological excavations at Tirzah dating to the 8th century BCE, two sets of weights were found in shops: one for buying and one for selling. The practice was specifically prohibited by commandments in Deuteronomy and Leviticus, but that did not stop the crooked merchants from defrauding their customers.[[1]](#endnote-1) They took advantage of the poor and vulnerable, not only ignoring their needs but trampling them underfoot in their race to riches. They sold the chaff of wheat, slyly mixing it in with good wheat or sweeping up the refuse and selling it to desperately hungry people who could afford nothing more. My seminary professor Jim Mays describes Amos’ words as

*a portrait of [people] who can see only profit and are blind to the reality of the [person] whom they exploit. They love the Lord less, mammon more, and their [neighbors] not at all*.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Now I know this appalls you, and if it doesn’t, if it seems to you this is just the yin and yang of business in a “buyer beware” market, then know that the Lord is speaking directly to you through these words of Amos! For appalled as we may be by the blatant greed, grift, and gouging of the poor that was going on, the Lord was more appalled! “*Surely I will never forget any of their deeds*!” is how the NRSV translation portrays the Lord’s oath, but the English does not really capture the full force of the Lord’s rage. For in Hebrew, the text is really a fragment: “*If I ever forget their deeds…*” It is as if the divine dander is up so high that the Lord cannot even finish the oath. “If I ever….” and what follows then is a litany of disasters that will befall the people – earthquakes, days turned dark as night, laments ringing through the land like those for the death of an only child. The baldness on every head is not a sudden look-like-John plague, but a sign of repentance and mourning as the people shave their heads and don sackcloth to reflect their misery. As if that were not bad enough, the Lord tops it all off by declaring that there will be no word from the Lord:

*They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the Lord, BUT THEY SHALL NOT FIND IT!*

SAYS THE LORD

What the Lord is suggesting is that in their time of trouble, when they finally recognize that they need the Lord to rescue them, the Lord will be nowhere to be found. That was the great nightmare of Israel – to be abandoned by God. And in fact, that is what will happen not long thereafter, as Israel is invaded by the Assyrians in the time of Amos and is carried off into bondage in Babylon 200 years later when Amos’ prophecy reaches its final form. It was there, far from home, that Israel’s fears were realized; they feared that the Lord had given up on them.

What is remarkable is that there is here no off ramp. One might expect after these dire predictions to hear a big “*BUT if you repent of your sins and return to my ways….,*” but there is no such assurance. This is an indictment of the people, not a call to repentance. It is reminiscent of Jonah calling out in the streets of Nineveh, “*Y’all gonna’ die!*” with no offer of a path to avoid that disaster. Yet when Nineveh did repent, God spared the city and its people. No such promise is made by Amos to these cheating misers; only doom and gloom are predicted.

When we read this passage together in the Bible Study on Monday, some were quick to say, “but God would never abandon God’s people. There must be some good news here, some promise of redemption.” We who read the prophet’s words with Easter eyes know that redemption does come. But for those who first heard these words there is no such hopeful word for them to hear. There is instead a blanket condemnation of their greedy, thieving ways. It is a warning that resounds in Jesus’ words to his disciples: “*You cannot serve God and mammon*.” Why then when this clear message echoes across the Old and New Testaments is there such an attempt in our culture to do just what Jesus tells us not to do – to claim to serve God while serving wealth and striving for more? To paraphrase that great hymn by Harry Emerson Fosdick: Why are we so intent on being rich in things at the risk of being poor in soul?

Just this week the President unveiled a $100,000 fee on successful applicants for a high-skilled worker visa program and proudly announced an executive order that would allow wealthy foreigners to pay $1 million for a “gold card” for U.S. residency and companies to pay $2 million for a “corporate gold card” that would permit them to sponsor one or more employees. U.S. residency is now available for purchase for the wealthy which is a far cry from those words of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty: “*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free*.” “*I was a stranger and you welcomed me*” has become “*I was a stranger and you offered me a refuge – for the right price!*” Tax cuts for the rich are being funded by cutting health care for the poor. And advertisers continue to peddle their products with the false assurance that they will make you more happy, respected, better looking, or envied by your neighbors. As the 19th-century philosopher Arther Schopenhauer once said, “*Wealth is like sea-water; the more we drink, the thirstier we become*…”[[3]](#endnote-3) Some years ago there was even a book by a TV evangelist declaring, “*God wants you to be rich!*” which perhaps suggests that he never read this passage from Amos, for what God really wants is for you to be rich in soul!

God wants you to be faithful in all aspects of your life, to put God first, and that includes in your economic life. God’s economy is very different from that practiced by the people in Amos’ day or in many corners of our world today. In an article in *Presbyterians Today* a Presbyterian pastor at First Presbyterian Church in New York City responded to the question, What is God’s vision for the economy?

*I believe the Christian view about the economy is that it is a tool or a means of accomplishing God’s plan. God’s ultimate vision for our economic, communal life is that it support all members of the body….We have the capability of alleviating hunger and disease and poverty with the economies we have now. God’s vision for the economy means everybody [and note ‘everybody’ is not limited to Americans] can live a life free of the kinds of human suffering prevalent in the world, and that we can think of ourselves as all parts of the body.”[[4]](#endnote-4)*

What a blessing it would be to see that vision realized, a vision in which God’s interests were put ahead of our own interests, a vision of love enacted through meeting everyone’s basic needs, a vision in which we serve God alone, not God AND wealth, a vision in which we are rich in soul at the risk of being poor in things! As Eberhard Arnold suggests: “*Our richness consists in this: each day we are allowed to live, filled with God’s love and gathering treasure in heaven…”[[5]](#endnote-5)*

That is God’s vision, and we have a part in making that happen. Amos’ prophecy made clear God’s will for the people in his day, and it demanded of them some drastic change from what they had been doing. It is that same vision God has for us as Jesus articulated it and showed us, and we would be wise to heed his words and change our ways. For our God is a patient God, but also a God of justice who demands that we act justly. Instead of trying God’s patience, try following God’s way. For that is the way of life and hope and blessing and peace. For, despite Amos’ dire words, there is one last oracle from the Lord in the final chapter of Amos. It offers the promise of a better day, after the suffering, after the abandonment, after the mourning and wailing and gnashing of teeth, after that generation of greedy sinners has passed away. And that promise is this:

*I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,*

*and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them;*

*they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,*

*and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.*

*I will plant them upon their land,*

*and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given*

*them, says the LORD your God.*

So it was. So it is. So it will be. Amen

1. *The Old Testament Library: Amos*, James Luther Mays, Westminster Press:1969, p.144 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. at p.145 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Arthur C. Brooks, “The Satisfaction Trap”, *The Atlantic*, March 2022, p.25 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mark Hostetter, Associate Pastor for stewardship and mission to the corporate world for First Presbyterian Church, New York City, interviewed by Cary Estes, *Presbyterians Today*, October 2009, p.19 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Eberhard Arnold, *Salt and Light: Living the Sermon on the Mount*, Plough Publishing House: 1998, p.139 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)