

Aim at Righteousness

Amos 6:4=7
I Timothy 6:6-19

Six weeks ago Isaiah Jarvis of Tulsa, Oklahoma got beamed in a Little League World Series game. While batting he got hit in the head—millimeters onto his helmet but *not* his skull—by a pitcher who had obviously hit puberty. A tall, heavy young man. A young man who throws a baseball *hard*. The impact sounded like a hammer hitting wood. Isaiah, who goes by Zay, fell to the ground and clutched his head. Television coverage of the game, a regional final, cut to Zay's mother, her mouth and eyes wide open. After a few seconds Zay got up and jogged to first base, clearly okay. But then he turned and looked at the pitcher who had hit him, on the mound. He did not appear angry, but concerned. He asked the umpire for time out, took off the helmet that had protected his head, and walked to the center of the diamond. He had seen that the pitcher who had hit him was crying.

Zay Jarvis walked up to that pitcher, hugged him, and said, “Hey, you're doing great. Keep it up.” The pitcher nodded but did not lift his head. His infield teammates walked to the mound and consoled him as well. Clearly, all of them understood that Zay had nothing but good intentions. They came not to protect their teammate but to reassure him—as their opponent who had just gotten hit in the head was doing. The pitcher's coach arrived and said, “You're a good man. Look at me. Look at me.” The

young man eventually looked up and both the coach and Zay Jarvis said at the same moment, “You didn't mean it.” The camera cut again to Zay's mother, wearing number 17 earrings in honor of his jersey number, sobbing with relief and pride.

We know that both Old and New Testaments label us transgressors by nature, incapable of purity, utterly dependent on the grace of God. And so be it. This judgment of humanity is completely true. Yet our story has another twist to it. We also can behave righteously. Not completely, not permanently, yet significantly. And both testaments tell us that God calls us to aim at righteousness. We must try. We must swallow our fear and our anger, and walk to our brothers and sisters and console them when they have hurt us. Without question we have hurt them. And God, who sees all, knows our pure and impure motivations and our harmful and helpful actions. Praise God, our relationship with God does not depend on our behavior. It depends on our faith. But our behavior matters. Profoundly. God calls us to aim at righteousness.

The prophet Amos lived in the northern kingdom of Israel during the long and prosperous reign of Jeroboam. The Big Three, the more distant, giant empires of Assyria, Babylon and Egypt, were not at war—a thing they often practiced on Jewish territory, which lay between them. The Israelites controlled the closer, smaller nations of Moab, Philistia and Aram. They developed a growing trade network with the Phoenicians, whose ships called at ports as far away as Crimea and what would become Barcelona. Add it all up and we see a picture of the richer classes growing in number and personal net worth. The ruling classes were happy. King Jeroboam

relaxed the enforcement of Torah law, especially the laws prohibiting the worship of any God but Yahweh. He himself made public sacrifices to the Canaanite fertility god Baal, and the goddess Ashtarte.

Amos came from a little village not far from Nazareth, in Galilee. The book bearing his name calls him “a dresser of sycamores”. The biggest sycamore I can remember ever seeing stands a block up and a block over from our house in the front yard of a neighbor. Amos could have a full-time job dressing that one tree. But just consider the contrast between where he comes from, and the king. Amos making critical prophecies about the oligarchy is roughly akin to a kulak from some Siberian village shouting nasty things about Vladimir Putin in Red Square. Yet Amos does it. The Spirit of the Lord fills him with visions and he proclaims them. In the one we read today he predicts the rich will go into exile first. Those who lounge on ivory beds. Beds that first came into existence as elephants tusks in central Africa. The anoint themselves with the finest oils, which grew and were processed in Macedonia. It takes connections and money to own these items in Israel under King Jeroboam.

This ruling class will go into exile first, according to Amos. Nobody in power in Israel at this time fears exile. The very thought strikes them as absurd. And they going first? Even if they were at war *their* sons would not fight. No, they would pay a bribe and gain an exemption. No, fighting battles is for the lower classes, the poor, the disconnected. If the nation suffers a terrible defeat then yes, everybody will be vulnerable to the depredations of the mighty empire and its soldiers. But we are

nowhere near there. We can imagine them laughing at this rustic with the funny Galilean accent claiming Yahweh has decreed such a thing.

We have not yet considered *why* Amos believes the rich will go into exile first. In a word, the answer is justice. The ruling class—as it so often does—has been behaving *unrighteously*. They have procured those ivory beds and cruets of oil by wealth they have amassed largely at the expense of the poor. Amos, who also herded sheep, could expect to work from dawn to dusk for criminally low wages. The same fate befalls the vast majority of men. The women, of course, slave away even longer for no payment at all. The one exception is those women who sell their meager produce or clothing they have made with their own hands in the local market. Meanwhile, the owner class profits at every turn, usually while doing nothing more than maintaining their network of cronies. Yahweh, Amos says, finds this not only unjust, but a direct violation of the spirit and the specificities of the Law. Hence the threat of exile for those behaving so unrighteously.

When we turn to our passage in I Timothy, we turn from a negative threat of prophecy to positive encouragement from a man writing one of his proteges. The Apostle Paul is the writer. And he echoes Amos' critique of the wealthy. His words contain perhaps one of the most misquoted sayings in history. Paul writes, “the love of money is at the root of all kinds of evil.” This frequently gets shortened to “money is at the root of all evil.” In fact the words “love of money” shape Paul's thought in an important way. The love of money is a kind of idolatry, a worship of a false god.

Money in and of itself has no moral or ethical value. But loving money leads to all kinds of evil, to jealousy and idolatry, and to all the misbehavior they cause.

We press ahead to that positive encouragement. Paul writes to Timothy, his protege, who now leads a church Paul helped found some years before. Timothy is probably serving in Thesslonica in far eastern Greece. Yet the words we are about to examine can apply to all Christians. "Pursue righteousness," Paul writes. Pursue justice, obedience to God's law, wisdom in the spirit. Righteousness. Paul fleshes out this imperative by listing righteous character traits, like godliness and faith. He urges us to "fight the good fight of the faith." Faith preceded by the definite article ("the") means Christianity, which of course depends on our having faith in the risen Christ. But Paul wants us to think comprehensively about the implications of pursuing righteousness. We need to apply it to the big picture.

Paul will give an example of this comprehensive application by returning to the rich. Unlike Jesus, who told the rich it was exceedingly hard for them to enter the kingdom of heaven, Paul does not tell them to go, sell all they have and give it to the poor. Instead, he calls on the rich to stay humble and to be generous. Paul himself depends on contributions from rich Christians to sustain his ministry. Again, what matters is not whether we have money. What matters is what we do with it. Paul finishes with the admonition to rely not on wealth for security, but on God, "who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." I have complicated thoughts about Dave Ramsey, the Christian radio personality who preaches a very particular set of

financial behaviors. But one saying of his I love is that he wants people, “to live like nobody else so you can *give* like nobody else.” Follow my principles, he means, and you will get rich enough to give enough to make a difference.

In a few weeks we will enter stewardship season, when we will focus on giving. As the Bible speaks about it from cover to cover it is appropriate to have spoken about it today, as well. But now we turn to other examples of righteous behaviors, things we can do because we want to live like nobody else. On the individual level, we can give to the hungry. Literally. We in the church office receive a steady stream of requests for help. Roughly half of the time they ask for money. The rest of the time they tend to ask for gas or a ride someplace. I have delivered a man to a local drug addiction rehab center, and recently took another to Walmart, where he used his own money to buy a few things. We buy tanks of gas for people struggling to get someplace far away along one of our artery roads. Manna from Seven distributes food to hundred every Friday. We can feed people in many ways.

Finally, we may not speak enough about moral behavior. This happens (or doesn't happen) because we do not wish to come off holier-than-thou. But if, like the rich people Paul addresses, we behave righteously *and* humbly, we set a quiet example. We increase the measure of good in this world. We spread the love of Jesus. Aim for righteousness. We cannot hit the mark every time. Not one of us is righteous, as Paul wrote to the Romans. Lord knows I am not. Yet when we aim for it, we obey God and we in our small ways do God's work. Aim for righteousness.