

“Seek Me, Seek Good”
Amos 5:1-17

February 7, 2016

SCRIPTURE INTRO:

This winter we’re studying the little book of Amos.
Amos is not a book of the Bible that we read very much.
I suspect that’s because it has a message
that many American Christians never hear.

Amos is about God’s judgment.
It’s a message that’s not intended to comfort us at first—but to frighten us.

But if you open yourself to Amos’ message,
and accept it as God’s inspired word,
and if you let it have its way with you,
then there is profound safety and comfort to be found.

INTRO: One of my daughters—I won't tell you which one—
has had several boyfriends in college.
She's broken up with each of them for different reasons.

The first one was fun and charming, but she said he was too bossy.
At first she thought it was something he might grow out of,
but then she met his parents and discovered that his dad bossed his mom.
She said, no way, I'm not signing up for a life of that, and broke up.

The second one was a kind, thoughtful young man—
but she said he lacked direction. Had no clue what he was going to do in life.
She said she didn't want to be married to someone who had to find himself—
so she broke up.

The third one had direction, but she said he was too much of a homebody.
He didn't want to do anything fun, he didn't want to socialize much with other
people and didn't have much of a sense of humor.
So she broke up with him.

In each of these breakups she was the instigator,
and each time the boy was completely surprised and said: Why?
Because he felt like everything was going great between them.
He though he was just what she was looking for—but he wasn't.
He was living in fools paradise.
She has boyfriend number four now—we'll see how that goes.

Now this might not be the best illustration, but the majority of Israelites in Amos'
day felt like everything was going great between them and the Lord.
They were completely confident that their religious activities and their pilgrimages
and sacrifices pleased God and inclined him to be for them and to bless them.
The idea that there might be something fundamentally wrong with them
that would cause the Lord to reject them and turn his back on them—
that was the farthest thing from their minds.
We're just what God is looking for. Things are fine between us.

Look again at verse 14. There's a phrase that's easy to miss.

Seek good, not evil, that you may live.

Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you just as you say he is.
See, the Israelites were saying that Yahweh was with them.
They felt things were going fine between them and God.
But in spite of their good feelings, things weren't fine. Not at all.
A breakup was coming and it was going to be devastating.
God was going to turn Israel over to Assyrian conquest.

So what did the Lord want from Israel?

You might imagine one of those boyfriends asking:

What do you want from me? What are you looking for?

What did the Lord want from Israel? What was he looking for in them?

What did he expect them to be or do before him so things would be fine,
and so he would really be with them and for them?

And closer to home, what does the Lord want from you?

I'm reading from the New International Version.

The editors of this Bible have given these verses (5:1-17) a title.

The title is "A Call to Repentance."

Even though the term repentance does not occur in these verses,
that's exactly what Amos is doing—he's calling them to repentance.

That's what the Lord wanted from them.

But you could just as well title these verses "A Call to Faith."

Because its also about Israel's lack of faith in the Lord and her need to believe.

Repentance and faith are virtually synonymous in the Bible.

Jesus sometimes told people to repent, sometimes he told them to believe.

When crowd asked Peter how to be saved, he said: Repent.

When jailer asked Paul how to be saved, he said: Believe.

Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin.

They are two ways of describing what God wants from us, what looking for in us.

They describe the disposition of a heart and life that is toward God.

But what exactly is this repentance and faith Amos is urging on Israel?

What does this disposition toward God look like? What does it consist of?

This passage shows us in a very straightforward way what God wants from us.

Let's look at it under two headings:

1. A common misunderstanding of repentance and faith
2. The true presentation of repentance and faith

Credit where credit is due: Dr. Robert Rayburn's sermon on this passage

MP#1 A common misunderstanding of repentance and faith

In our American evangelical Christian world, repentance and faith are often understood to be a particular kind of experience.

Specifically, it is a crisis experience.

You have to come to a sudden and dramatic recognition of your sin and guilt and then a sudden and joyful impulse to surrender your life to Christ.

The superficial details or the level of emotion might vary—

but real conversion, real repentance and faith, is expected to happen this way.

Some of you grew up in churches that had a regular altar call.

The altar call is based on this crisis experience.

It expects the person to feel and display of strong feelings of guilt and joy.

But even if altar calls were not part of your own church experience,

just being an evangelical Christian in America, you can't help but be influenced by this emphasis on feelings and experience.

This is such a common way of looking at repentance and faith,

that it has led many people to question the genuineness of their own salvation.

I remember my sister once telling our father: I don't think I'm saved.

He asked her why not and she began to describe, very accurately, crises she had heard in a great many testimonies along with intense emotions of guilt and joy.

She honestly said:

I haven't felt those things, not like that. So I must not be a Christian.

This tendency of evangelical Christianity to think of faith and repentance in terms of particular kinds of feelings and experiences goes back over 250 years, to the Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening.

Those were two historic revivals that had an enormous impact on the church—especially in America. The Great Awakenings did much good.

We're still enjoying the spiritual benefits of those revivals.

But they also brought with them a good deal of nonsense and confusion.

In many respects, it was during the Second Great Awakening—early 1800s—that this concept of salvation came to dominate.

The altar call was invented during the Second Great Awakening.
By the altar call I'm talking about the use of specific methods—playing a hymn,
every head bowed every eye closed, I see that hand, come forward, so forth.
And with that, the expectation of people to have a crisis in which they feel
and display these strong feelings we've been talking about.
But the Bible never says that real Christians will always have these feelings.
Most of the Christians in the world are the product of Christian homes,
and the vast majority of them never had a dramatic, sudden crisis conversion
along with powerful emotions, weeping for joy, and so forth.
Think of how little we know about the conversion experiences and feelings
of the heroes of the faith in the Bible—practically nothing.
How did Abraham feel when he came to faith in the Lord? Bible doesn't tell us.

The only people in the Bible whose feelings we really know about in any detail
are the Psalm writers—particularly David and Asaph.
But they tell us virtually nothing about how they felt when came to faith.
David is especially notable because he says in Psalm 22—
“You made me trust in you at my mother's breast!”
David never knew a time when he didn't know the Lord and trust him.
He didn't have a dramatic conversion. He grew up a Christian, could say.

There are Bible stories of people who were suddenly and powerfully
shaken out of their unbelief and who came to Christ in a crisis moment.
Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 (Yes, we'll see him in heaven—a wild thought)
Zaccheus, the Philippian jailor, and most of all, the Apostle Paul.
There have also been many famous crisis conversions in church history.
Augustine in the garden in Milan, Luther in the monastery tower,
Charles Spurgeon that snowy morning in an almost deserted church.
And we've all met people whose lives have been changed by a dramatic
and sudden encounter with Christ. Praise God for those stories.

But they are by no means the norm.
Still less are they to be a pattern for everyone else.
The vast majority of believers didn't come to faith that way and never felt
those powerful emotions of guilt and dread overcome with joy and ecstasy.
And as I've already said: The Bible itself says almost nothing about these feelings.

Think again about the Apostle Paul.

His conversion is reported three times in Acts, once by Luke, twice Paul himself.

He also refers to his conversion in Galatians and 1 Corinthians.

But we're never told how Paul felt when he encountered Christ, and Paul himself never tells how he felt, what emotions he experienced.

I'm sure he felt them, but so unimportant, that the Bible doesn't tell us.

It tells the important thing: That Paul believed in Christ and began to follow him. There's a good reason the Bible doesn't place emphasis on feelings or emotions when it teaches true meaning of faith and repentance.

They don't prove you're right with God, no matter how powerful they are.

Let me read you the first-person account of a conversion story. The man who wrote was a hard-drinking womanizer. His mother kept urging him turn to Jesus. After one night of crazy partying, he came home and was disgusted with himself.

As I knelt by my bed in the darkness, my mind was strangely vacant; thoughts and words wouldn't come to focus. After a moment, it was as though a black blanket had been draped over me. A sense of enormous guilt descended and invaded every part of me. I was unclean. Involuntarily, I began to pray, my face upturned, tears streaming. The only words I could find were, "Lord, come down. Come down. Come down. . . ." It may have been minutes later or much longer—there was no sense of time—but I found my head in my hands, crunched small on the floor at the center of a vast emptiness. The agonizing was past. It had left me numb, speechless, immobilized, alone, tense with a sense of expectancy. In a moment, a weight began to lift, a weight as heavy as I. It passed through my thighs, my belly, my chest, my arms, my shoulders and lifted off entirely. I could have leaped over a wall. An ineffable warmth began to suffuse every corpuscle. It seemed that a light had turned on in my chest and its refining fire had cleansed me. I hardly dared breathe, fearing that I might end or alter the moment. I heard myself whispering softly, over and over, "Thank you, Lord. Thank you. Thank you. . . ." After a while I went to mother's room. She saw my face, said, "Oh, Chuck. . . !" and burst into tears. We talked for an hour.

Chuck was Charles Templeton.

Went on to become Billy Graham's right hand man. Founded Youth for Christ. I've told his story before. He began to doubt the Bible and then he rejected the faith, became a confirmed atheist, wrote books against Christianity, died in unbelief. But what about his experience?

One biographer compared the emotional intensity of Billy Graham's conversion story with Charles Templeton's and his conclusion was:

Templeton's conversion story beat the hell out of Billy Graham's!

Does that surprise you? It shouldn't.

Jesus told us to expect this. In his parable of the soils he said that

there will be people who receive the word with joy, but then fall away.
And that's exactly the spiritual climate Amos found in Israel.

It was full of people who were saying, we feel great about God.
We're having such wonderful worship services and full of such good feelings.

That means that God is with us. He's for us. He's on our side.
And Amos, the farmer preacher says: Your good feelings don't mean squat.

That brings us to the second point:

MP#2 The true presentation of repentance and faith

The great value of this passage is how it so clearly cuts through all the emotional
hype and shows us precisely what it is God wants from us and expects of us.
It tells us in a very homely way what it is to believe and repent.

Amos doesn't dwell on what he wants Israel to feel about her sin and her
relationship with God, or what repentance should feel like.
Instead, he tells Israel what she must do.

Twice in this passage Amos repeats the command, Seek. Verse 4 then verse 17.
These are the two main points of his sermons, and together they show what
God is looking for—what this disposition of faith and repentance looks like.
So let's look at both. Starting with verse 4.

This is what the LORD says to the house of Israel: "Seek me and live. Do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not journey to Beersheba. For Gilgal will surely go into exile, and Bethel will be reduced to nothing." Seek the LORD and live.

Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba were places of false worship.

They said they were worshipping the Lord there, but they were worshipping idols.
So the Lord calls them to forsake their misguided confidence in their idols and to
look to him, Yahweh, covenant God, for their peace, hope, and salvation.

God made human beings worshippers.

He implanted in every heart the impulse to find something great outside of
ourselves to make the basis of our hope, our purpose, our love, and our future.
God himself is the intended object of our worship. He alone is worthy.

Adam's Fall did not turn off the worship impulse in human heart, it corrupted it.
So we still worship, but our drive is to worship other created things.
We make those created things the source of our comfort, affirmation, our salvation.
We've talked about this theme many times over the years. It's huge.

Israel in Amos' day idolized prosperity and comfortable standard of living.

And they idolized religious activity—rituals, sacrifices, pilgrimages.

They did those things because they made them feel good, confident, secure.

What does the Lord say: Seek me and live. Don't seek Bethel.

You're putting your confidence in the wrong things.

Seek me, trust me, turn to me—Yahweh, the covenant making God—

and trust me for your security and your affirmation, purpose.

So that's the first thing God's looking for in us—that we seek him.

Now let's look at the second. Verse 17.

Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

Seek good, not evil. In other words, strive to live according to God's law.

That's the second aspect of true faith and repentance.

If you are really trusting and counting on the living God to forgive your sins and wipe away your shame and give you security and hope and a future then you will . . .

Seek good and not evil, and you will hate evil and love good.

In other words, if you really are seeking the Lord, trusting him, worshipping him above everything else, then you will want to know God's will and do it.

The problem with the Israelites was that they were not counting on the Lord for their life and purpose and salvation. They said they were, but weren't.

They were really worshipping other things.

And the proof of that was that they were not willing to do his will as he had revealed in his covenant and law.

True conversion, true faith, true repentance always has these two effects:

It make a person conscious of the Lord himself as the object of his hope, his trust, his confidence, his purpose, his loyalty—and—

It makes a person eager to do God's will and live as the Lord would have him live.

A real Christian will have his eye or her eyes locked on the Lord himself—

high in majesty, wonderful in mercy and love—

and will then seek to offer his or her life in obedience to God.

He won't think very much about why, he'll just know God should be obeyed,

he must be obeyed, and that through obedience I'll find true fulfillment in life.

Last night Will and I were flipping through the TV channels.

We watched a little bit of the Republican debate and a few other things.

But we settled on the NFL Awards Ceremony.

The last award was the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award.

Goes to players who demonstrate exceptional generosity and humanitarianism.

The award was given to Anquan Boldin, who plays for the 49ers.

Before he came on stage, there was a video highlighting the work of his charitable foundation. He's from the poor little town of Pahokee, Florida.

Lots of poverty there, not many opportunities.

But he poured his energy and presence and money into the school and scholarships. There were some clips of him talking to students, and you could just tell by their body language that they respected him and listened to him.

So he came up on stage for his acceptance speech.

I didn't know what to expect. Maybe you know Anquan Boldin—I didn't.

But right away I was impressed by the man—he was serious and humble, he thanked and praised many people, including his wife.

And this is how he ended his speech—I found it on internet this morning.

“I just finished up my 13th season, and when I first got into the NFL, nobody could tell me anything. I was living life. I had achieved my dream of making it to the NFL. But I soon realized, that's not what life is all about. I realized that my purpose in life wasn't to make it to the NFL and to score touchdowns. God put me on this earth for something much bigger than that. And I realize and understand what my purpose in life is now, and that's to honor God in everything I do, on the field, off the field. So it's my prayer and my hope that I can live out the rest of my life honoring God, and that I can help as many people as possible. And once again, I'd like to thank the NFL and the Peyton family for this tremendous honor.”

It's my prayer and my hope that I can live out the rest of my life honoring God, and that I can help as many people as possible

That's it. That's true faith and repentance. That's true conversion.

That's the disposition of a life and heart toward God. Seek me and seek good.

There is real emotion in true Christianity and a true walk with God.

All of you know that well enough.

There are truly emotional, genuine conversions. There are times you feel deep

sorrow over sin, there are moments when you feel his love, when you feel a weight lifted, when sense the light of his presence. But those feelings less than worthless if you are not willing to seek God first, and seek to do what he says. That's what he wants from you.

So this passage is call to simple self-examination.

Am I really seeking the Lord, not idols?

Am I seeking good and not evil in my daily life?

Can't ask yourself those questions too often. Ask and answer.

And then make those two seekings your marching orders every day.