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**Speaker:** Jordan Elgie, Pastor of Worship Arts  
**Scripture:** Amos

*Amos 5:4-7, 10-12, 21-24*

*4 Now this is what the Lord says to the family of Israel: “Come back to me and live!*

*5 Don’t worship at the pagan altars at Bethel; don’t go to the shrines at Gilgal or Beersheba. For the people of Gilgal will be dragged off into exile, and the people of Bethel will be reduced to nothing.”*

*6 Come back to the Lord and live! Otherwise, he will roar through Israel[a] like a fire, devouring you completely.*

*Your gods in Bethel won’t be able to quench the flames. 7 You twist justice, making it a bitter pill for the oppressed. You treat the righteous like dirt. 10 How you hate honest judges! How you despise people who tell the truth! 11 You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent. Therefore, though you build beautiful stone houses, you will never live in them.*

*Though you plant lush vineyards, you will never drink wine from them. 12 For I know the vast number of your sins and the depth of your rebellions. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. 21 “I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies.*

*22 I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won’t even notice all your choice peace offerings. 23 Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps. 24 Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.*

The Minor Prophets are only called minor because they wrote shorter books. Scholar Walter Bruggeman says “ There is nothing “minor” about the message of these books, even if they fill less pages” Their messages are very “major.” That is why we have chosen to do the whole series titled “*Majoring on the Minors.*”

Today we will be looking at the prophet Amos. As with all the other prophets we have been covering this summer, we can’t go over everything. So we will focus in on a few key verses and see what they have for us today. And by way of introduction, I have to ask: Have you ever seen received something counterfeit? Maybe you’ve come across a fake bill? Fake designer sneakers and handbags online? Fake watches? I asked google to show me some fakes, and as it turns out, knock-offs and fakes are pretty common these days! And...some are pretty hilarious. These are pretty obvious, so obvious in fact, that I would bet the people selling these wares likely either know they are fake, or they simply don’t care and are just trying to make a buck.

But what about someone selling or offering something counterfeit... and they believe it’s actually genuine? Like they are somehow unaware or ignorant of the fact that what they are offering is completely bogus? A knockoff?

I have titled the message today, “When worship goes wrong” I think this title will begin to make sense as we examine the “counterfeit” worship that the Lord called out through the prophet Amos.

Jump back with me to the 8th Century BC. -For Context. The 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC is the historic home of: Homer, the Greek author, who wrote his famed epics the Illiad and Oddesy,

The first historic solar eclipse recorded in China  
The city of Rome was said to be founded by Romulus

Amos lived and ministered around 760's BC  
Making Amos's prophetic writings among the earliest of the prophets in our bibles.

Like most prophets, he did not go to "Prophet School." He writes at one point,

*Amos 7:14-15*

*"I was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the Lord took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, Prophesy to my people Israel.'"*

He was a Shepherd and a Farmer. He was from Judah which was the southern kingdom. He lived near the border of Israel--the northern Kingdom. Even though he was from the south, as we read he was sent by God to make his prophetic proclamations to the northern kingdom of Israel.

Remember that the Northern Kingdom of Israel split from Judah about 150 years before Amos. This took place when King David's Grandson took the throne in Judah. The northern tribes split and they seized their own independence. 1Kings 12

Amos spoke mainly in 2 key cities in Israel: Samaria, which was largely the center of government, and to Bethel which was largely the center of religious life in Israel. The time when he lived and ministered, was largely a prosperous and peaceful time in Israel, but this prosperity was limited to the upper class. It had no "trickle-down" effect. It was only enjoyed by the wealthy and the powerful. At this time in the north, the rich were getting richer, the poor were getting poorer. Those with the means to help and protect the poor and powerless simply did not do so, despite instructions in God's covenant law to do so. In fact, the rich and powerful who were supposed to be following God's Law were actually the ones doing the oppressing!

Here we come to some of Amos's main themes:

Amos called out the pervasive oppression and abuse of the poor and disadvantaged by the wealthy in that society.

He exposed the actions of the wealthier people of the northern kingdom of Israel that explicitly violated God's covenant laws

Throughout his writings he calls out specific economic and social ills. Here are some of the harsh words for Israel, and I'll paraphrase a little

*Amos 2:6-8*

*6 This is what the Lord says:*

*"The people of Israel have sinned again and again, and I will not let them go unpunished! They sell honorable people for silver and poor people for a pair of sandals. 7They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way. Both father and son sleep with the same woman, 8At their religious festivals, they lounge in clothing their debtors put up as security. In the house of their gods, [a] they drink wine bought with unjust fines.*

*Amos 4:1*

*Listen to me, you fat cows[a]living in Samaria, you women who are always calling to your husbands, "Bring us another drink!" you oppress the poor and crush the needy,*

*Amos 5:11, 12*

*You trample the poor, stealing their grain through taxes and unfair rent. You oppress good people by taking bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts.*

*Amos 8:5-6*

*You measure out grain with dishonest measures and cheat the buyer with dishonest scales. [a] 6 And you mix the grain you sell with chaff swept from the floor. Then you enslave poor people for one piece of silver or a pair of sandals. And check out how these accusations compare directly to Some of God's covenant instructions to the people of Israel:*

**About Clothing put up as security for loan:**

*Deuteronomy 24: 12-13*

*If your neighbor is poor and gives you his cloak as security for a loan, do not keep the cloak overnight. Return the cloak to its owner by sunset so he can stay warm through the night and bless you, and the Lord your God will count you as righteous.*

*VS Amos 2:8*

*At their religious festivals, they lounge in clothing their debtors put up as security.*

### **Trampling the poor and exploiting women:**

*Exodus 22:21-23*

*“You must not mistreat or oppress foreigners in any way. Remember, you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt. “You must not exploit a widow or an orphan. If you exploit them in any way and they cry out to me, then I will certainly hear their cry.*

*VS Amos 2:7*

*They trample helpless people in the dust and shove the oppressed out of the way. Both father and son sleep with the same woman.*

In summary:

Unfairly selling people into slavery for minor debts.  
Trampling the helpless and oppressed.  
Not returning things taken in pledge.  
Demanding unfair taxes and rent.  
Bribing court officials to get their way.  
Using dishonest measuring and scales in the market.  
Cutting grain with chaff and dirt off the floor.

In this list, notice the nature of these things that God calls out as sin! These are not so much personal moral failings, like lying or envy or pride or lust, these are social sins, and economic sins. God isn't having any of it. And it's with this that we come to a famous passage that we will spend some time with:

After calling out all these wrongs, speaking through the Prophet Amos, God says to the people of Israel these verses that we heard earlier:

*Amos 5:21-24*

*21 “I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies.  
22 I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings.  
23 Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps.  
24 Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.*

*Here is how the late Eugene Peterson puts these verses in the Message translation of the bible.....and this may hit a little close to home for some us:*

*Amos 21-24*

*“I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religion projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public relations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to me? Do you know what I want? I want justice—oceans of it. I want fairness—rivers of it. That's what I want. That's all I want. So God jumps from calling out Social and economics sins, right to WORSHIP!!*

And here God basically says:

You hypocrites! I hate your worship! It's all wrong. I'm done accepting your sacrifices, your festivals make me sick, and your music gives me headaches. I hate all your “show.” It's totally counterfeit, it's fake. Wow! These are pretty strong words! And we need to really get into these verses! There's lots here. For starters it almost seems like God is hating on and condemning all kinds of outward religious and actions. Almost like he's saying, I can't stand all your “rituals”, public piety and your sacrifices and public offerings!” Away with your “show” - as if to contrast these things with positive acceptable private, heartfelt, “inner” worship. But I don't think that's what God is saying, I don't think that's what God is calling out here. We have to remember, GOD COMMANDED ALL THOSE RITUALS! IT WAS PART OF HIS COVENANT!

He gave explicit direct instructions to the people that they were supposed to do all those things, rituals, sacrificial offerings, and an annual religious festival. We have to remember that the first 2 chapters of Leviticus are entirely devoted to instructions from God just on how to make proper burnt offerings and grain offerings. So if God isn't saying, I hate ritualistic worship. *What is God* actually saying? Why do these verses go from calling out social sins, to calling out failures in worship? Why does God despise their worship?

#### Worship Gone wrong

It's here we have to look back at all the things that Amos spoke against. The people of Israel were "worshipping" in the temple in all the right ways and appearing to obey the rules, but they were completely neglecting to obey God in all the other aspects of life. Notably, in their social and economic spheres. It's like they thought their worship was the genuine article, but in fact it was totally counterfeit, fake, incomplete and bogus.

In his book "Old Testament Theology" Scholar John Goldingay speaking of this very situation in Amos says: "In the absence of obedience to [God] in the rest of life, heartfelt worship counts for nothing." - John Goldingay, Old Testament Theology

God's criticism was not so much directed at their worship practices. It was directed at the people! They were hypocrites! Their religious practices were not necessarily wrong, it was the incomplete manner and hypocritical attitude with which the people did them. Not allowing their behaviour "in church" to have any bearing on their behaviour everywhere else! They seemingly obeyed God in worship, but were completely disobeying God in the rest of God's rules for life. Their worship had gone wrong.

Again John Goldingay's words are pertinent: "In the absence of obedience to [God] in the rest of life, heartfelt worship counts for nothing." So according to what God calls for in these verses, what would have made Israel's worship *not* "wrong"? What is the antidote to counterfeit worship?

God says, I don't want fakeness, I want a flood of justice and an endless river of righteous living. Here we come ever so close to the heart of Amos's message. Through Amos, God calls for Justice & Righteousness.

Mishpat (justice) and Tzedeqah (righteousness) in the original Hebrew.

Before we get into more about what these words mean, notice the imagery employed here. The translation we're using uses the image of a "Flood" and a never ending river! One other translation calls for an "impassible torrent." I think there is a reason why God didn't say "I want a calm puddle of justice" and a babbling trickle of righteous living." What does the image of a flood conjure within you? Not exactly tranquil is it? Floods and raging rivers are constantly active, bubbling over, penetrating and enveloping everything in their path.

Have you ever been to Niagara Falls? The waters literally carve rock. Keep this metaphor in mind as we continue.

The word "Justice" or "mishpat" appears more than 200 times in the Old Testament! It means so much more than just punishment for wrong doing. Pastor and Author Tim Keller says, "mishpat" in its most basic form means to treat people equitably. He says, "Over and over in our Bibles, mishpat describes taking up the care and cause of widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor." It means 'giving people their rights' or "what's right", whether that be punishment OR care.

And righteousness, or "tzedeqah" means essentially, living with "right- relationships" that is between people and with God. "Righteousness" is NOT all about private morality as we may think. It is a way of living that recognizes the "image-bearer" ness of others and treating them as such. It involves our relationships with others, and with God.

Speaking on this concept of righteousness, Rabbi Jonathan Sakks - - calls "tzedeqah" an, "ideal" or a "foundational concept" for Jewish ordering of society. This idea of "mutual respect," that of "right relationships" between people and

God. The combination of these 2 words as a pairing is significant!

In an article in Relevant magazine, Tim Keller says: *“When these two words, tzadeqah and mishpat, are tied together, as they are over three dozen times [in the Bible], the English expression that best conveys the meaning is--social justice.”*

And why is God so concerned with ‘social justice’? Well, again and again in our bibles we can see that God is described as being on the side of all those who are not treated “justly” and “rightly”.

God is the (Ps. 68) “Father to the fatherless, the defender of widows” As Luke 1 says, the one who “fills the hungry with good things”.

*Psalm 146:7-9*

*7 God gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The Lord frees the prisoners. 8 The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. The Lord loves the godly. 9 The Lord protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the plans of the wicked.*

So let’s recap, what again is God calling for? God is calling for us to behave in the world as God would! This is God’s call for a flood of “Treating people equitably” and an endless river of “living in right relationship” with people and with God.

Does this sound familiar at all to you? Does this ring any bells? For me this evokes some other words of God, namely those in response to the question, “What is the most important commandment?” (Matt 22) To answer this question, the God-Man, Jesus, answers thus:

*‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’* This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: *‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’*

The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” All the demands of the prophets. This is Jesus interpreting Amos!! AND he says:

Love God, Love people.

Essentially through Amos, it’s like God is calling Israel back to his original commands! Love me, God says, live in right relationship with me, and

Love others, treat them fairly, equitably, give them what is “right” When I hear - “Love God” I think – worship. I’m not just talking about music here folks. We all know better than that I’m talking everything church and beyond. (The “vertical” dimension!) Bible reading, prayer, tithing, small groups, personal devotions...etc.

And when I hear “Love people” - I think - mission. (The “horizontal” dimension!) Serving the purposes of God in the world, by sharing the Good news of Jesus, and by actively seeking “what is right” for those around us.

Worship and Mission

Loving God (worship) - Loving people (mission) - Is that not ever so close to what God calls for through the Prophet Amos? Righteousness, and Justice? From the words of Jesus we can see that these 2 things - love of God, and Love of people - are intricately linked- or “equally important” as this translation puts it. So again, to come back to Amos and our key verses for today:

God’s calling out of Israel is the result of a failure in right-mission. The people of Israel were NOT living justly and righteously, not living up to what God had called them to do and be, and the result was that their “worship” also failed. It had gone all wrong. The failures of Israel in “right mission”; in loving people, were linked inextricably to their failure in “right worship”; in loving God. So, a failure to love people, by doing justice and living righteously, was equal to a failure in loving God!

If these two things are as closely linked as Jesus says they are...It’s almost like you could say, that a gage, or measure of how much we love God, (*not just how much we ...say... we love god*), might just be how much we are actively loving others. And by others I don’t mean our family, friends, or even our church, or work, or school community, by “others” I mean those that the prophet Amos is talking about. The poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the refugee, the abused, and the mistreated. Again, John Goldingay has more pointed words on the matter: He says, “Loving God without loving one’s neighbour is impossible” And I have to say. This is like a kick in my stomach, cause to be honest I don’t have this together! I fall short here time and time again. But that shouldn’t mean I should wallow

in self-pity and do nothing about it. Maybe it means I should do something about it.

So what might that look like? What does a flood of justice and an endless river of righteous living look for us today?

Where do “worship” and “mission” or “Loving God” and “Loving people” intersect for me and for you? So what is concrete/actionable?

For starters, let’s all work towards the realization that what we do on the weekend is important (i.e. worship) but it is dependant and tied up with how we live the rest of the week (i.e.mission!). Let’s imagine for a moment that Amos was writing directly to us, right here and right now. Maybe his words would have gone something like this:

*Your Religious behaviour and actives, attending church, going to small group, praying, tithing, your benefit dinners, and music events, your summer camps, are all pretty much useless without the counterparts of love filled, right-living with others, and the working towards of “what is right and just” for everyone in society.*

What does love filled “right-living” with others look like?

Well, remember that the sins called out by God in the book of Amos were SOCIETAL AND ECONOMIC in nature,. I’ve already quoted him before but here is Pastor Tim Keller again in his Book Generous Justice - describing what the active work of doing justice might just look like in the societal spheres of life:

*“In our world it could mean prosecuting the men who batter, exploit and rob poor women. It could also mean respectfully putting pressure on a local police department until they respond to calls and crimes as quickly in the poor part of town as in the rich part. It could be to form an organization that both prosecutes and seeks justice against loan companies that prey on the poor and the elderly with dishonest and exploitive practices. It could also, “mean taking the time personally to meet the needs of the handicapped, the elderly or the hungry in our neighborhoods. Or it could mean the establishment of new non-profits to serve the interests of these classes of persons. It could also mean a group of families from the more prosperous*

*side of town adopting the public school in a poor community and making generous donations of money and pro-bono work in order to improve the quality of education there.”*

*-Tim Keller, Generous Justice*

But maybe that all seems too big of a thing to jump into.

1. So perhaps an easier place to start is to PRAY. Next time you pass a homeless person instead of avoiding eye contact and thinking to yourself “why don’t they go get a job?” Why not use that same energy to instead say “Lord, help me recognize that person as someone who bears your image. Watch over them, provide for them, be near them.” When you begin to pray in this way, for those different than you in society, watch out! Cause God may just go to work on you increasing your capacity for compassion and care.

2. Another easy starting point is to contribute to your local church’s initiatives. In this case, that’s us! North Park!

With your time, with your energy, with your resources.

Did you know that every dollar that North Park receives helps in part to fund and maintain initiatives like our food pantry, our refugee settlement initiatives, our Alpha Program, and our operation of camps and programs in under-resourced areas of the city...ect.?

We have so much to contribute don’t we? Even those of us who may feel like we have so very little, still have capacity to help someone, to pray, to give and to serve. 4th Century Bishop and Theologian “St. Basil the great” who was known for his work among the poor of his day said these strong words, which perhaps can instruct us today:

*“When a man strips another of his clothes, he is called a thief.*

*Should not a man who has the power to clothe the naked but does not do so, be called the same? The bread in your pantry belongs to the hungry. The cloak in your wardrobe belongs to the naked. The shoes you allow to rot belong to the barefoot. The money in your vaults belongs to the destitute. You do injustice to every man whom you could help but do not.”*

So as we to conclude today, allow me to encourage each and every one of you to take your experience/your faith/your own right-relationship with God on the road. Let your “worship” your religious activities, affect you in the rest of life!

Love God, but go and ACTIVELY LOVE PEOPLE! God requires it! In the words of another prophet,

*Micah 6:8*

*This is what the lord requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy,*

The end of worship is the beginning of mission. God told Abraham that he would be blessed to be a blessing. Worship that has “not gone wrong”, worship that God wants results not just in receiving a blessing, BUT in us, being a blessing! The end of worship, is the beginning of mission. It should look like us taking our experience of God’s reigning presence with us wherever we go. Bringing a flood and torrent of justice to those who need it, and an endless raging river of righteous living, of right relationships with God and with people, wherever we go.

One of my favourite theologians, N.T. Wright says, we are “put-right” to be “putting right” people in the world. This is what justice and righteous living look like. And when life looks like that, then God will surely delight in all of our loud songs, our sacrifices, our religious behaviour our prayers, our programs and summer camps.

## Points to Ponder

### **Majoring on the Minors ~ Amos**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. In your own life, have you tended to view sin as mostly “personal moral failings”? Have you ever considered these sorts of “societal” and “economic” sins that God calls out through the Prophet Amos?
2. What comes to mind for you when you hear these words from God: “I hate all your show” and “Away with your noisy hymns”? Have you ever considered how God views all of your own religious or devotional behaviour?
3. Mark Galli, the editor in chief of *Christianity Today* says, “In the Prophets, the Lord chastises his people for their overly fastidious worship, especially when their so-called devotion to God was not matched by the love of neighbour.” In what ways can you see our worship and religious devotion as being “overly fastidious”? What could be the antidote to this? What impact do you think an increase in “loving our neighbours” might have on our worship?
4. In addition to some of the things covered in today’s message, can you imagine some other ways that the work of “justice” and “Righteous living” might play out in your day-to-day life? What impact can you see these things having on your family? How about your community?