

January 14/15, 2006

Am I Greedy?

Amos 4:1-3; 6:4-6, 8; 8:4-5, 7
Pastor Bryan Clark

Sometimes in the stillness of the night I find myself asking the question, *What have I done with what I've received?* I understand that my time, my talent and my treasures are all a gift from God to be managed or stewarded for God's purposes. I don't want to get to the final breaths of my life and have regrets, knowing I can't go back and do it again. I don't want to have a shame that I've wasted what God gave me. At the end of the day, I want to know that I've been faithful and true. But that's hard. It's really hard.

One of the reasons it's so hard to rightly manage what God has given us is we have to be out of step with the culture. You have to live countercultural. It's hard because you have to embrace a completely different value system. That's hard.

Listen to the story of Eric and Kendra as they wrestled with God about what to do with a sum of money that they received. (Video)

Let me ask you a question this morning: Are you greedy? Sounds a bit loaded, doesn't it? You know, Jesus made an interesting statement in Luke chapter 12. He said, "Watch out (or be on guard) against all forms of greed." It's an interesting phrase because nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus say, "Be on guard against adultery...against lying...against cheating...against murder..." with that same terminology. The reason is this: because I know when I'm committing adultery, I know when I'm lying, I know when I'm cheating.

But greed is in a different category. Greed has a tendency to sneak into my life and begin to take over in such a way that I don't even realize it's happening. And that's why Jesus' words were, "Be on guard (watch out, be careful)"—because this is something that sneaks into our lives and takes over.

Now that in itself is enough of a problem. But when you realize what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 6, it's yet a greater problem. Turn with me to Matthew chapter 6. Jesus is using the human body as a metaphor, as a picture. He's talking about the body and He's talking about the eye to make a greater point. In Matthew 6:22, Jesus, speaking, says:

The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Matt. 6:22-23, *NASB)

Now He's using a metaphor with the eye like a lamp. And if your eye is good (it's a word that means healthy), then the light comes in and your whole body responds accordingly. You operate in the light. But if your eye is bad, it doesn't matter how much light is in the room, the light does not penetrate. Therefore, the whole body functions in darkness. So He is saying that if the eye is bad, it affects every other area of the body.

In essence what Jesus is saying is there is an issue in our lives. And if this issue is not brought under control—if we do not have the right perspective from God's view—it's an issue that will affect every other area of our lives.

Now if that's true, we would immediately say, "Then what is that? That sounds pretty serious." Well, look at what immediately precedes and what immediately follows Jesus' discussion on the

eye and the body. The answer is what? It's money. Immediately following that metaphor, that picture, He goes into the discussion about the reality that we can't love God and money. You can't serve two masters. You're going to have to decide: Do I love God or do I love money?

I realized several years ago that this is not an issue of fundraising. This is not just an issue of what you do with your money. If this area of our lives is not brought under the obedience of Jesus, it dramatically affects every other area of our Christian lives.

A couple of years ago we began talking to LifeGroups about at some point working their way through the Crown material. If you're a LifeGroup leader, I want to talk to you for just a moment this morning. You need to understand, this isn't just about helping people budget and balance their checkbook. This isn't just about fundraising. You are their shepherd, and you'll be held accountable before God for how you've shepherded that flock. And you need to understand that if the people in your LifeGroup do not get this area of their lives right before God, it will affect every area of their Christian walk. They have no hope of becoming complete in Christ without this area being addressed. That's why it's so critical.

But this isn't a new problem. This has been a problem for thousands of years. This morning I'd like to invite us to go back about 3000 years to the Book of Amos. Now, I know most of you probably were reading through Amos this week. But for those of you that weren't, you might want to look in the Table of Contents (it's kind of hard to find).

Amos is what we call a Minor Prophet because of the size of the book. Amos himself wasn't a prophet; he wasn't the son of a prophet. He tells us that in chapter 7, verse 14. He was a farmer; he was a rancher. By all accounts, he seemed to be highly successful—probably very prosperous, probably had a considerable amount of wealth himself.

God pulled Amos, in essence, out of the marketplace to deliver a message to his peers. Now over the Christmas season, we looked at a couple of the prophets that wrote during times of tremendous adversity. But Amos is on the other end of the scale. Amos is writing during a time of significant prosperity: the nation is flourishing; they are prospering; there is extreme wealth; there is safety.

We're told in chapter 1, verse 1, this is a time when Uzziah was king in the south; Jeroboam was king in the north. It may have been the peak of prosperity for the northern kingdom. As a matter of fact, Amos was writing to a culture very much like ours—a culture that was highly prosperous.

This morning as we talk about prosperity and the risk or the dangers of prosperity—how it can affect us negatively if we aren't careful—I would like to ask each of us to think of ourselves as that prosperous or wealthy person. As soon as I talk about wealthy, most people say, "Well, that's not me." You understand how this applies to somebody else. It's always tempting, when we talk about stewardship, to apply the message to somebody else.

But if you look at the world's economy, every person in this room and in the upper room is wealthy. There are very few people in the world that can even imagine living at the level of the least among us. I am absolutely convinced, from God's point of view we are counted among the wealthy.

So this morning I'm asking you to look in the mirror and ask, "How does this apply to me?" From time to time we show various stewardship videos, and sometimes they're people of significant means who take big steps of faith and give generously to God. And there's something within our hearts that causes us to say, "Well, if I had that much money, I'd be generous too." No, you wouldn't. *No, you wouldn't.* If you're not generous with what you have today, you would not be

more generous with more. As a matter of fact, statistics show it's the other way. With people, the more they have, the less generous they seem to become. And Jesus said, "If you aren't faithful in a little, you aren't going to be faithful with a lot." The reality is, if you aren't generous with what you have today, you would not be more generous with more. So we all need to look in the mirror and ask ourselves, *Am I greedy?*

I want to take us through three glimpses of the problem in the Book of Amos in order to identify the dangers of prosperity and affluence—what it can do to us.

In chapter 1, verse 2, Amos says:

The LORD roars from Zion.

This is the imagery of God as a lion, and He's roaring. He's roaring a judgment; He's roaring a warning. It's about several things, but one of those things is the affect of prosperity and how the people have become greedy. And those are the texts we want to look at. So I want to start in chapter 4, verse 1. He says:

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, "Bring now, that we may drink!" (Amos 4:1)

Amos was a courageous man. He was so courageous that he compared the affluent women of his day with a cow! Now ladies, I didn't write it; I'm just explaining it. The cows of Bashan were known for being fat and lazy, because the valleys of Bashan were lush valleys. And the cows that were there had more than they could ever eat. They were known for being plump and basically pretty lazy.

Now in our culture we tend to think skinny is better. But in all of the ancient cultures, everybody was skinny—most of them were starving. What they considered better was plumpness, because plumpness was a picture of prosperity. As a matter of fact, you see it even in the Old Testament. It often talks about fatness in a very positive way. It's a sign of prosperity.

So Amos is saying, "You ladies, you're like the cows of Bashan. You're just kind of fat and lazy, to the extent that you take advantage of the poor and the needy." Now it isn't just a case where they aren't helping the poor. That would be bad enough. Not only do they not help the poor and needy but they take advantage of them. They abuse them; they conflict them. They say to their husbands (and that word "husbands" is a unique Hebrew word, not the typical word; it's like "my master, my lord"), "You go out there and make more money so that you can buy me more stuff." That's in essence what's being said.

So while these women lounge around and get fatter and fatter, they're driving their husbands to bring home more and more because they have this insatiable appetite that cannot be satisfied. And they want more and more. So they drive their husbands to go out and take advantage of the poor and the needy in order to satisfy this appetite that just won't go away.

Verse 2 tells you how God feels about that:

The Lord GOD has sworn by His holiness, "Behold, the days are coming upon you when they will take you away with meat hooks, and the last of you with fish hooks. You will go out through breaches in the walls, each one straight before her, and you will be cast to Harmon," declares the LORD. (vs. 2,3)

The warning is that they will be conquered as a nation. And if they're going to act like cows, they'll be treated like cows. They'll have these meat hooks (devices to connect the cattle together to drive them to another location). *If you don't want to go, we'll pull out the fish hook.* Now, the fish hook is more like what we would think of as a meat hook—it was a great big hook. Basically what he was saying is, “If you don't want to go, we'll put the hook in you and we'll drag you.” What he says in verse 3 is, “We'll drag you to your corpse and then we'll dump you in the valley of Bashan.”

When he talks about “casting,” it's the word that's a reference to casting a corpse. Harmon is probably Mount Hermon. He's saying in verse 3, “The devastation will be so great we won't have to go around looking for a gate; we'll just go through the walls because they'll be absolutely devastated and torn down.”

It's very important to understand what God is condemning here is not prosperity. There's nothing wrong with making money. There's nothing wrong with having money. There's nothing wrong with prosperity. There's nothing wrong with a nice home and nice things.

The problem is when we begin to love our things more than God—when we begin to love our money more than God, when we begin to find our significance and our security in our stuff more than God. And suddenly, rather than stewarding what we've been given for God's purposes, we're taking advantage of people and we have this appetite that seems like it's never satisfied. We just have to have more and more and more, and this greed begins to define our lives. That's what he's talking about.

The next picture is in chapter 6. I'll not take the time to read verses 1-3, but basically it is describing people who have, because of their prosperity, found their security and their significance in their stuff, in their bank accounts. And now in verse 3 Amos asks the question, “What good will that be in the day of calamity? In the day of calamity, what difference will that bank account make?”

No matter how much money you have in the bank, what difference does that make when the doctor says it's cancer? What's difference does that make when your child is dying? What difference does that make when your marriage is falling apart? Is that bank account somehow going to be there for you? That's what he's saying. He's trying to turn their attention back to finding their significance and their security in God—because only God will be there in your hour of need.

We pick it up then in verse 4:

Those who recline on beds of ivory and sprawl on their couches... (Amos 6:4a)

A bed of ivory would be a picture of tremendous excess. When he describes them sprawling on their couches, that word “sprawl” is a Hebrew word that's very graphic. We would, I think, refer to it as a drunken stupor. You imagine somebody that's partially dressed with one leg and one arm are flopped over the bed and they're just living this life of excess and abundance in an immoral fashion.

...and eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall. (v. 4b)

They eat the best of the meats.

Who improvise to the sound of the harp, and like David have composed songs for themselves. (v. 5)

They sit around all day playing music, imagining they're like King David, the greatest king of all Israel.

Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls... (v. 6a)

It's another picture of excess. Instead of drinking wine from a goblet, they're drinking from the punch bowl. It's just this whole lifestyle of ridiculous excess.

...while they anoint themselves with the finest of oils, yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph [*in other words, the ruin of Israel*]. (v. 6b)

That's the key line in this. The problem is that while they live these lives of incredible affluence and all of these luxuries and significant waste, they don't have the slightest care that their nation is being destroyed all around them. They do not care about the poor around them; they do not care about the needy around them. They do not care about anybody but themselves.

That's what greed does to us. It makes us very self-oriented and we no longer see the needs of others around us. We're consumed with ourselves and accumulating for self. If I find my security and my significance in my stuff, I cannot afford to give anything away. I can't afford to be generous. I'm giving away my self-esteem; I'm giving away my security. And so I become very selfish and greedy.

From time to time we hear these stories—typically in a third-world country where there's some sort of a tragedy, a disaster—and people rally together and they get money and medical supplies and food and we send it over. More times than not, it seems we get a report back that these dictators have gathered it all for themselves. They've taken the money and the medical supplies and the food, and by and large they've kept it for themselves, while those who desperately need it go without.

We hear those stories and we're appalled. We're appalled at that attitude so lacking in compassion. Let me ask you a question this morning: Are you sure that you're that much different? The reality is, everything you have is from God and it belongs to God. And it was given not to be totally consumed upon yourself but to be managed for God—to be managed for the greater good for those who need it, to accomplish God's purposes in the world.

How many times are we guilty of taking what God intended for His purposes and just consuming it upon ourselves? And in that way, we're not that much different.

Verse 8:

The Lord GOD has sworn by Himself, the LORD God of hosts has declared: "I loathe the arrogance of Jacob, and detest his citadels [*or his towers*]." (v. 8a)

What He's saying is, "I loathe that these people that I've prospered, that I've poured out My blessing upon, have now turned their affection to their money rather than Me. They've now made their stuff their god instead of Me. And they build these towers and they get their self-esteem, their significance, their worth in life out of their stuff." God looks at what He intended to be His blessing and how it has turned His people into a selfish, greedy, idolatrous people, and it breaks His heart. He says, "That isn't what I intended; that isn't what I wanted."

The third peek is in Amos 8. We pick it up in verse 4. He says:

Hear this, you who trample the needy, to do away with the humble of the land, saying, “When will the new moon be over, so that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath, that we may open the wheat market...” (Amos 8:4-5a)

In other words, what he’s saying is these people tolerate the Sabbath day. They put up with it; they tolerate it. But in their heart they’re saying, *When is this day going to be over so I can get back to making money?* They’re putting up with the things of the Lord, but the passion of their heart is making more and more and more money. It says:

...to make the bushel smaller and the shekel bigger, and to cheat with dishonest scales. (v. 5b)

This is what happens when we’re greedy: we compromise our integrity. They use one size of basket to buy it and one size of basket to sell it. They have different shekels of different weight, and the scales are dishonest. It’s just saying that these people will cheat any way they can cheat in order to accumulate more, because that’s now the definition of what’s in their heart.

Verse 7:

The LORD has sworn by the pride of Jacob, “Indeed, I will never forget any of their deeds.”

The reality is there’s a tendency for us to think that because our financial dealings are private, no one will know. We think, *If no one will know, then I’m okay. I can pull off an image of one thing at church, and what goes on behind the scenes nobody else needs to know about it.*

But God knows about it. *God knows about it.* You’re not accountable to me. You’re not accountable to anybody else in this church. You’re accountable to God. And God knows. God doesn’t forget. God knows how you’ve managed or stewarded what He’s given to you. The reality is 1 Corinthians 3 says one day the books will be opened and everyone will know. It’s not going to stay hidden. That’s why it’s so important that we think about how we’re stewarding what we’ve been given.

The message in the New Testament is the same. It’s a problem that just goes on and on. Turn with me quickly to 1 Timothy chapter 6. When Paul is writing to Timothy, the warning is almost identical; the wording is almost identical. 1 Timothy chapter 6, starting in verse 17:

Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed. (vs. 17-19)

It’s the same warning—a warning to those who are rich, those who have prospered—that you not place your trust in those riches, that it doesn’t become the source of your significance, your self-esteem, your security. But trust in God. And then appreciate and enjoy what God has given you. Steward it; share it. Take care of others and enter into the life that God promises that only He can give.

Now what are the practical realities of what we're talking about this morning? What does God want from us? What does it mean to be a good steward? Well, first, let's wrestle with the question: Do you love God more than your money? And do you care about people more than things?

I know what the right answer is. That's not what I'm asking. Let's do this, this morning. Let's take all of your financial records and put them all up on the Power Point. And you don't get to make any comments; let the record speak for itself. What are we going to see? Are we going to see clear evidence from the record that you love God more than your money, and that you care about people more than stuff?

Do you realize today that all around our city and throughout the world there are hundreds of thousands and millions of people living in darkness and despair that do not know Jesus? If we care about people more than stuff, wouldn't that be evidenced in the record, as we've invested some of what God has given us to accomplish the mission and reach lost people?

Do you remember at the end of *Schindler's List* when Schindler is looking at his watch and his ring and his cars—the things he has left. And with each one, he thinks, *I could've done more...I could've done more. Each one would have purchased another life.* Well, of course, there's no end to that until he's destitute. But what was being reflected there was a complete change in value system, where through that experience he recognized people are more important than stuff. And he was overwhelmed with that.

That's what God wants us to understand. God doesn't want us to give everything away. It's not a contest. We can become legalistic about that and see who can give away more stuff—and it all gets off track. You could give away everything until you're destitute. That doesn't impress God. That's not what He's asking. Poverty is not a virtue.

What He *is* asking is, “Do you love Me more than the money? And do you find your significance and your security in Me instead of your stuff? And do you care about people more than your stuff?”

Once you're at that point, then you ask God, “God, what would You have me do? *What would You have me do?*” Over the last couple of years, we've shown you some remarkable stewardship stories of people who have taken significant steps of faith and done some pretty radical things in order to pour more into the campaign.

But we've never said everybody needs to do that. All we've said is, “Would you be willing to pursue God and be obedient to whatever He asks you to do?” I know families that have significantly downsized in order to give more to the kingdom. I know families that have put off building a home in order to put more into the kingdom. But I also know families over the last couple of years that have built beautiful new homes and have been extremely generous to the kingdom. The question is: What would God have you do?

In the video we saw, Kendra and Eric illustrated that beautifully as they agonized over it, struggled with it, and prayed about it. And in the end, they experienced the joy of obeying what God had called them to do.

If you're new to this, throughout the Old Testament a tithe was always presented as a minimal standard. A tithe is ten percent. If you're new to this, that's a great place to start. I wouldn't hesitate to tell you God wants you to give at least that. And then what God would have you do on top of that, that's between you and God. All we're asking is: Would you be willing to pray with a

heart of obedience that says, “God, I love You more than my money, and I care about people more than my stuff. And what would You have me do?”

Wouldn't we all agree that we don't want to get to the end of our lives and in those final breaths find ourselves filled with shame and regrets that we took what God gave us and consumed it upon ourselves—with the realization, *I don't get a second chance. I can't go back and do it again?* Wouldn't it be far better, in those final moments, to have this deep-seated sense of peace and satisfaction, knowing I will hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant”?

*Our Father, we're thankful that You are such a generous God. Lord, we look around this world, and most people in our world can't even imagine what we experience on a daily basis. Lord, You haven't prospered us so we can consume it on ourselves, but that we would be managers and stewards, that we would enjoy it, that we would appreciate it, and we would be generous for Your eternal purposes. Lord, I pray for each of us, that You would lead us and guide us to see what You would have us to do with what we've been given for Your glory.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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Study Questions
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Opening Discussion

1. Have you had experiences in life that have caused you to rethink what ultimately matters in life? Share those with the group.

What is your conclusion about what really matters and why?

2. Are you greedy? Explain your answer.
3. In what ways does greed affect other areas of our lives?

Bible Study

1. Read Matthew 6:22, 23. What is Jesus saying in these two verses?

What immediately precedes and follows this metaphor about the eye and the body?

2. Since God sees the whole earth, would He consider us poor or wealthy by the world's standards?
3. Read Amos 4:1-3; 5:10-15; 6:4-8; 8:4-8. In each of these texts, what is God's accusation, and what is His warning?

What did prosperity do to the people in Amos' day?

4. Compare Paul's words in I Timothy 6:17-19 with Amos' words. What is the danger of prosperity?

What are the evidences that we have become greedy?

5. Is it possible to have a sincere concern for people lost in darkness without Jesus and not be generous in our giving to God? Why or why not?

Application

1. We would never ask you to do this, but if you were to lay out all your financial records before the group, would you be satisfied that the records reflect you are managing what God has entrusted to you for His purposes? Would you be confident that the records would show you are not selfish or greedy?

2. If you would not be comfortable with what people would see, what needs to change for you to feel like you are managing what you've been given for God's intended purposes?

3. The bottom line issue is not how much can you give away compared to someone else. It's not a contest to see who is more spiritual by who lives on less. Poverty is not a virtue. The question is what would God have you do? What would God have you give? Each individual and each family must answer that question prayerfully before God. Enjoy what you've been given. Be thankful for your prosperity. Be obedient to give as God leads you to give.