

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

The Sabbath Principle

Amos 8:4-7

The Season of Creation

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This morning's reading from the Gospel of Luke is a strange parable but it has a kick in the end. No one really knows exactly what to do with the actual story, but there's bound to be good news in here somewhere. A manager has been called into the boss's office, and he is about to get fired. Before he goes in, he calls up customers and tells them to quickly sit down and cut their debts in half. His motivation is straightforward and understandable—to use the last bit of leverage he has to get some friends so he has some sofas to sleep once he's fired. What is confusing is that the master praises him for his shrewdness, and Jesus seems to join in as well. Huh?

Maybe the master is more untethered from his riches that you might think, and so he is able to laugh away a loss to his bottom line at the pluckiness of his subordinate. It's kind of hard to say for sure what's going on here. Commentators note that Luke himself may have been less than sure what to take away from this, so he includes four sayings of Jesus in his conclusion. It's the final one that sticks the landing. It's not entirely certain what the relationship is between the saying and the parable, but the force of the lesson sticks in its simplicity and the challenge that it poses to all people, all the time, everywhere, maybe especially us, at this time, right here: you cannot serve God and serve wealth. There's good news in here somewhere.

You cannot serve God and wealth. Or in the old translations: you cannot serve God and *mammon*. If the parable is a head-scratcher, the conclusion is wake-up call for individuals and for nations, perhaps especially one in which both God and mammon are placed front and center. But in what way is it a wake-up call? And waking up to what?

There are Christians over the centuries who have been harrowed by this warning and others like it and so have given away all their possessions. They embraced what's called "evangelical poverty." Evangelical poverty isn't just suffering the difficulties of being poor; it's a choice to embrace the vulnerabilities and uncertainties of being without what money can buy. St. Francis may be the most famous one who detached himself from his possessions. As he was waking up to the gospel, he read that Jesus had nowhere to lay his head; Jesus had no money to speak of; Jesus relied on the goodness and generosity of others. He said, "I will do the same." He embraced poverty of a radical nature. Other Christians have done the same, if you cannot serve God and mammon both, they made sure—as best as they knew—to serve God and God alone. Monastic communities follow this same path in one way or another. It's a way that

makes no sense to the way of the world. It's a hard way, but it is experienced by those who embrace it as a way to a certain kind of freedom.

All the rest of us are finding good news in this kind of passage in different ways. We are either negotiating the principle of God or mammon with mixed results or just ignoring it altogether to our peril. We are negotiators who have any possessions at all, when we have anything that looks like wealth at all, and if we think this applies to someone else, we become aware that half the world lives on just a few dollars/day, which is not an easy life. When we have anything more than that, we are wealthy by the barometer of the world's status. But is that the same thing as serving wealth like wealth is our god? Not necessarily, though that doesn't mean we're off the hook on this passage.

Wealth in the Bible isn't just a measure of money in the bank; it's a power and principality, rising to the level of deity, or demon, that claims allegiance and devotion if you're not really careful or really disciplined or really holy. At the very least, residents of the world's richest economy in history ought to be careful. Wealth isn't just what you have; it's what you've done to get what you have and what you want and what you're willing to do to get it. Wealth is tricky because wealth knows the human heart—when you get what you want, you just want something else or something more. The demon of desire works a very big shovel at the bottom of the empty hole within us that's still there no matter how many times you think you've finally filled it. The principality of wealth is the engine and logic of western economy. Pervasive marketing by design generates envy and desire; desire drives demand. Demand requires productive labor, which generates income to use for consumption to satisfy desire—for a moment, until envy convinces you to desire something more. We run on a treadmill of consumption that never ceases. Never slows down. Never is satisfied. This is the sneaky, pervasive power of the idol of wealth, always in front of us, always just barely out of reach.

It's a very modern, western feature of modern capitalism with nasty consequences for personhood, society, and the earth. But it's not just that, not just now, not just here. It's an ancient social and ecological disorder, too. A picture of what it looks like is in the prophet Amos from the 8th century B.C. Here, God warns against two plagues of the human heart when the false god of wealth gets you: religious hypocrisy and social and economic injustice.

In Amos, and perhaps in every society, they two become totally intertwined. Amos 5 is the most well known, where God says to would-be worshippers, "I hate, I despise your feasts, I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. I don't want to hear your hymns and praise choruses. Music to my ears is justice rolling down like waters and righteousness flowing like a stream." The organized religious observances, no matter how on pitch or how well organized or how beautiful are hypocritical unless justice and righteousness are practiced. Why? Because to worship God in word is to follow God in deed. Or it is not actually worship of God, but it is worship of a stand-in, a pretender for the one true God. True worship of the true God flows from the sanctuary to replenish the barren land and nourish the hungry people. This is the judgment, this is

the test, this is the mirror: if the assembly's worship is not replenishing the land or nourishing the hungry then it wasn't worship of the one true God to begin with. It was something else. And if Amos or history or our own selves bear any witness, we're always tempted to the something else.

Who we worship is revealed by how we live. Our work is our prayer; our prayer is our work. Christian life isn't just a liturgical duty; it's the flowing back and forth of life in the work and worship on the Sabbath. The sabbath principle of life is rooted in sabbath observance. I don't think we need to return to a strict, imposed legalism about what you can do or not do on a Sunday, but at the least the question we should consider is: what is your rhythm of life? When do you pause consuming or producing? When do you delight, rest, feast, celebrate, pray, breathe, bless, give thanksgiving, give generously? What's not commodified in your life yet? That's where your life is resisting the tentacles of the god of wealth, and that's where righteousness and justice for the vulnerable in the whole world begin.

In Amos 8, the people observe Sabbath only because they have to. It's a snapshot of the limits of state-mandated religion. They count down the hours for the end of the Sabbath day so that they can get back to cheating their neighbors. The people still trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land, groaning, "When will this sabbath day be over so we can get back to selling? We will make the ephah smaller and the shekel heavier and practice deceit with false balances. We'll buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and selling the sweepings of the wheat."

Sabbath was so annoying, so inconvenient. It was a day to cease labor in honor of the Creator in whom the 7th day of rest was the crown of creation. And it was a justice law designed to give rest to all of society—not just to the property owners who have power but to "your ox and your donkey, and your livestock, and the resident alien in your towns" (Deuteronomy 5:14)—everyone who depends on you. The "Sabbatical principle" is woven all through the scripture—this rhythm of work and prayer for individual good and community participation. This is woven all through scripture in worship, work, rest, justice, consideration of others, and skilled care for the land. All of this is the heart of covenant of the people with God—faithful worship of God and God alone, active concern for the most vulnerable made manifest in the way we treat one another, and skilled life on the land. And in this covenant, life can thrive—life with God, life with neighbors, and life with the land. But when the covenant is hollowed out, we see suffering for so many at the hands of the few who benefit from it—or think they do. Sabbath and the sabbath principle are at the heart of everything. Sabbath is resistance against the unrelenting hiss of wealth, it is solidarity with neighbors; it is recalibration of the purpose and meaning of life. And it's delight. We need more delight in the world.

It's in such contrast to the siren song of wealth-desire, this principality and power opposing God and God's way. There's a movie from about 20 years ago in which Ben Affleck gives one of those cinematic fire-you-up speeches to a conference room of fresh

faced recruits to The Firm, “You’re only here—the only reason anyone ever comes here to work for this firm—is to get filthy rich like me, I drive a Ferrari.” He pulls the keys out of his pocket and slides them down the eight-foot conference room table. It’s absurd. He goes on with his speech, “If you want to save the world, teach 3rd graders. You’re not here to make friends or save the beluga whale.” It’s ridiculous once you see through it. What if delight in life is actually having a few friends, living in a way that the beluga whales can keep on doing whale things freely, and 3rd graders are pretty awesome. Nothing against Ferrari’s, I guess, but which is the good life? What’s the true good life?

Amos is an unsettling account of a fatally flawed economic system that benefits a few for a while but will inevitably collapse. And when it does, it brings down with it worship, the human community, and the land devastated by relentless human greed. In the end, as the wealth-desire goes from a whisper to a roar, the judgment is that they lose their capacity to even hear God. There comes a famine, “not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.” They shall seek the word of the Lord, but they shall not find it.

Amos is the Cormac McCarthy of what it looks like for a society to worship wealth—a hard-nosed, dystopian vision of the unintended consequences of doing what makes sense in the world, but is not the way of God. The poor suffer; God becomes inconvenient, at best; worship becomes a silly spectacle; and the land is exhausted by relentless consumption and disregard. If only this were a report card on an ancient society; if only this were a finger pointed at super wealthy lounging in their lairs on their fantasy islands.

Worship is intended to turn and return our hearts to the one true God in word and deed so that our relationships are just and righteous and full of life. That’s the formation that God intends to work in us—that we would grow in our care for neighbor and land as we grow in love for God. Amos makes this as clear as anywhere in the Bible. So does Jesus, who does not abolish the law or prophets. The church’s worship rings hollow to God—our worship, no matter how slickly produced or how big a stadium we fill or how sincere we sound—it’s all clanging cymbals to God when we trample the poor and the land on the way to the altar. That’s how nations are judged.

This is good news. It really is, because it is clarifying. It shows that if we ever have an instinct that something is broken, Amos is standing there saying, “Yeah. It’s broken, but there’s a better way.” It’s good news because it means that no matter how high the dam of disregard can be built, God’s river will not be held back. It will flow freely, deep and wide, one way or the other. The day will come when the world is awash in the good judgment and justice of God. So as we await for that day, may the grace of the Lord Jesus be with us, that in word and deed our lives together are foretaste and first fruit of that coming day when all creation and all people can sing together, “Alleluia, alleluia.”

Amen.

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