

“Some weeks ago, news of the Atlanta public school scandal hit the presses. One hundred seventy-eight Atlanta public school teachers and principals, from more than seventy-five percent of schools in the city were found guilty of cheating on state standardized tests from 2001 to 2009. They even held cheating “parties” to collectively alter their students’ test scores. The fraud was so pervasive and effective that between 2002 and 2009 the district’s eighth graders appeared to have the greatest overall improvement in reading in the entire nation! The Superintendent, Beverly Hall, a shining light of educational success, has been accused of destroying documents evidencing widespread, systematic cheating on standardized tests in the Atlanta Public School. To make their own resumes look good, such educators callously deceived the public, parents and, ultimately, the students themselves, denying the kids a real education.

Last week a national poll of high school students found that ninety-five percent openly admitted to cheating on school work. Many considered it no big deal.” – Peter Jones (blog, August 2011, <http://truthxchange.com/articles/2011/08/08/cheating-disorder/>)

Is it any wonder that our society’s view of God is that He doesn’t consider our sin “a big deal.” You see, the morality of cheating aside, the real issue is that we in the body of Christ are always tempted to reimage God into an image that appeals to our sense of morality, so that God judges ‘those other people’ and bequeaths His blessing upon us. So, we have preaching that has declined into rah-rah sessions meant to keep people happy in a society where people judge with their thumbs, hitching a ride to another church or flipping the channel to something that is more “appealing” and “positive.” The current state of the Western church lies on a steep precipice of uselessness and Godlessness in its continued wayward spiral of preaching words that don’t really say anything that our culture is not already selling. We need the Holy Spirit to fill His church and raise up a generation of desperate worshippers, proclaiming the gospel that includes holiness, sin, the Fall, and judgment so that the gospel becomes truly good and transformative news in its glorious proclamation of holiness, grace, redemption, and salvation.

Amos preached a message of true worship in a land where religion had been empty of worship and filled with self-imagery. He was hated for it, asked to leave the land and shut up. Maybe some of you will feel this way after this sermon. I hope not, for Amos preached with tears to bring a message of hope. Let us hear the Word of the Lord together.

## Amos 4-5:

Attempting to Ascend Heaven Without Holiness

### **A Funeral Dirge for Empty Religion**

v1 - "HEAR the Song of Grief!"

1. it is a word of lamentation, a song of sadness, like a dirge sung at a funeral or into history to remember the sadness
  - a. Can you see the heart of Amos here? He is grieving, choking back tears, speaking the truth but not arrogantly to merely berate the people
  - b. Imagine this section of Scripture as a sermon being preached while Neil placed funeral in the background
  - c. It might be worse than usual!
2. Three strophes to this dirge:
  - a. Fallen
  - b. Neglected
  - c. Alone
3. The People had become more concerned with the place of God than the God of the place:
  - a. The LORD commands them not to run to their places of worship where the promises were given to the forefathers (Abe, Isaac, Jake)

- i. Their dependence was upon their position, not upon the One who graced them with such position
    - ii. Their love was with the blessing, not the Blessor
    - iii. Therefore, they devoted themselves to the places of God, but did not devote themselves to the God of the places
  - b. The three places mentioned were places where the forefathers had devoted themselves to God because of His grace toward them
    - i. Bethel (Gen 12,13,28, place of altars to the LORD)
    - ii. Gilgal (Jos 4,5, where Israel entered the Promised Land and God reiterated that He had removed the reproach of Egypt, they celebrated Passover there)
    - iii. Beersheba (Gen 21,22 - Abe named with pagan chiefs, lived there and worshiped the LORD, Gen 26 - God reiterated His promise to Isaac, Gen 46 - to Jacob, too)
  - c. Because they idolized the places, the shrines, the places of worship, then God would take them away
    - i. This is the same as our empty religious places, traditions, and structure
      - 1. Beware idolizing the “Holy Land”, church buildings, or
    - ii. Mostly, our “places” take on our image much more than God’s, and when this happens God warns us to return to Him, and if not He will remove them
    - iii. Our devotion is not to be to a place, but to a person: God Himself
- 4. So God Reminded them of His attempts to warn them and finally warned them to prepare to meet Him
  - a. The LORD recalls His works to turn them back (4:6-11)
    - i. hunger (v6) - Yet you did not return to Me
    - ii. drought (v7-8) - Yet you have not returned to Me
    - iii. famine (v9) - Yet you did not return to Me
    - iv. death by disease and war (v10) - Yet you did not return to Me
    - v. death by natural disaster (v11, most likely fiery explosions of volcanic activity or methane?) - Yet you did not return to Me
  - b. Since You Did Not Return to Me, I Will Come to You in Power
    - i. The One who forms the mountains
    - ii. Creates the Wind
    - iii. Declares to man his most inward thoughts
    - iv. makes the morning darkness
    - v. treads on the heights of the earth
    - vi. The LORD, God of Armies, is His Name!!
  - c. They will be taken away as captives (fishhooks) through a destroyed wall
    - i. 1 out of 10 would remain

### **Empty Religion Offers Heaven Without Holiness:**

- 1. The places of worship in Israel lacked substance, truth, and transformation
  - a. They were places where people sought the semblance of God without the true presence of God
    - i. They sought His blessings (and assumed they received them b/c of their wealth) without the Blessor
    - ii. They assumed that God was there, but He was not! They needed to prepare to meet Him, because they had not!
    - iii. CHEESEBURGER analogy
  - b. They were probably very popular, obviously very attended
    - i. They brought many sacrifices and tithed twice a week, yet God calls this transgressing and multiple transgressions

- ii. They brought leavened offerings, which indicated that they were not listening to the LORD and His desires, but were rather "worshipping" God as they saw fit, using their own "wisdom" and understanding of God
      - 1. Cheap Grace: "He won't mind, we're His people"
      - 2. Cheap Grace: "Finding unleavened bread is too hard, God wants our lives to be free from difficulty"
    - iii. Arrogant self-worship, man-centered religion and exalts us to the pinnacle of wisdom and the reimagining of God into our own controllable likable image
  - c. They proclaimed their freewill offerings, making sure everybody around knew how much they sacrificed to God
    - i. This is a supreme example of religion, pleasing man rather than pleasing God
    - ii. Seeking the glory of man rather than praise from God
    - iii. Religion always seeks to impress other people
  - d. People were excited to come and the priests gave them what pleased the people, rather than what pleased the Lord
    - i. This is the danger of all religion: Self-centered performance and people-pleasing
    - ii. Because if you proclaim truth that makes people uncomfortable, they will not come anymore
    - iii. So, these places stayed encouraging, making people feel good about their lives, all the while rejecting God's presence and call to holiness and truth
      - 1. So Amos calls them "cows of Bashan" who demanded to be served and spent their lives for the purpose of drinking and eating
      - 2. The selfish pursuit of pleasure, *my* pleasure, was truly their god
- 2. God brings testimony against their hollow religion
  - a. Make justice unpalatable and throw down (refuse) righteousness
  - b. Hate the one who corrects them
  - c. Abhor the one who speaks with integrity
    - i. They despised the ones who revealed and spoke against their injustice, robbery, violence
    - ii. Anyone who called upon God's people to return to holiness and righteousness was abhorred and hated
      - 1. This sounds like the way people treat preaching today, so preachers have responded with feel-good sermons that are devoid of holiness and truth
      - 2. This is particularly, and sadly, the case with the ease of church-hopping, changing channels, finding somebody online that will tell people what they want to hear
  - d. They were coming to the places of worship, but THEY WERE NEVER CHANGING!!
    - i. Where there is not a heeding of the Word of God, of putting His promises and His commands into practice, there is no real worship of God!
    - ii. Heart transformation that leads to holy living is the foundational marker of a heart on fire with the Holy Spirit
    - iii. This was not happening to Israel. They looked just like the world. What about us? Do we look just like the world?
    - iv. Are we coming to this place expecting Heaven without Holiness?
- 3. Religion repeats empty traditional words without believing them or applying to the heart
  - a. Vv8-9 are most likely a hymn of the day that Amos uses here to remind the people that the power of God is real
  - b. And that God's immeasurable power will be against the ones who do not seek Him and seek good by hearing His word and living according to it
- 4. Religion is self-centered
  - a. Trample on the poor

- i. burden him by taking a portion (burden) of his food
  - ii. oppress the poor for the sake of their own gain (4:1)
- b. Afflict the righteous (v12)
- c. Accept bribes (v12) and turn aside the needy from the gate (v12)
  - i. Crush the needy (4:1) for the sake of their own self-centered gain
  - ii. So much so that the prudent man keeps his mouth shut for fear of being terrorized in such an evil time
  - iii. The good man is intimidated into silence

### **SEEK GOD and SEEK GOOD to LIVE!! (5:4,6)**

1. Seek Good and Not Evil
  - a. so the LORD of Armies will be with you, not against you
2. Hate Evil
  - a. This is a word of affection that takes action
  - b. How are we at hating evil?
3. Love Good
  - a. Affection again, the significance of the heart, not merely empty actions
  - b. God wants us to return wholly in holiness
  - c. How are we at loving good?
4. Establish Justice
  - a. Build it to last and to remain: Righteousness (the way the Lord has revealed that things should be)
  - b. the LORD may yet be gracious
    - i. Amos holds out hope still

### **GOSPEL CENTERED OBEDIENCE**

1. There is only one way to truly prepare to meet God: wrapped in Jesus' righteousness in humble faith
  - a. Christ has entered into the Holy of Holies to secure our eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12), how shall we respond?
  - b. Let us enter into the holy place confidently, not confident in ourselves or our own self-worth, or pretentiously, or clinging to sin while trying to approach
  - c. But let us enter into His holy presence with confidence in Christ our Righteousness, our atoning High Priest having secured our redemption for us, humbly bold, restfully desiring to honor the One who so graciously provides our salvation
2. Remember the God of Mercy Who May Yet be Gracious
  - a. He is the same God that preserved a remnant of His people
  - b. He is the same God who graciously brought His people out of slavery to worship Him exclusively in a land devoted to Him
  - c. He is the same God who not only saved and preserved His people in the temporal and earthly sense, but He is the God who sent His own Son to bear up His holy justice so that they might live abundantly, who poured out His Spirit so that they might be with Him always, who promised that they would see Him face to face.
  - d. But let us also remember that we are to "pursue holiness without which no one will see the Lord." (Heb 12:14)
3. Because God is gracious to us in Christ and will never let us go, let us live holy lives to honor Him:
  - a. Let us return to holy living, believing ALL the words of the Bible, loving what God loves and hating what God hates because of the greatness of His person and His glorious grace.
  - b. Let us strive to know God and know His goodness more than merely seeking His blessings, because of the greatness of His person and His glorious grace.

- c. Let us turn away from our self-centered empty religion and let justice flow like the waters and righteousness like the ever-flowing stream because of the greatness of His glorious grace
  - i. Let us reject the deadness of cheap grace and commit together with the apostle James (for real love always commits itself): “I will show you my dependence on Christ by means of my works” so that all people might see them and glorify our Father in Heaven.
  - ii. NOT “let us show our good works so that God will accept us” but RATHER, “God accepts us graciously in Christ, even though we rebelled against Him and His glorious kingdom, therefore let us show our good works for His glory out of gratitude for all that He has graciously done.”
- 4. True worship leads to holiness because worship is the highest form of love
  - a. Because we believe the Word of God as it is and trust our Love!!
  - b. Because we love the God who is holy and it makes us tremble before Him to even consider that which would dishonor Him
    - i. Religion asks the question: “How close to the ‘line’ can I get without breaking the rule?”
    - ii. Worship asks the question: “Will this honor and magnify the One I love?”
  - c. When the Word of God says to love your neighbor, we do it because we worship the living God – it honors and magnifies Him
  - d. When the Word of God says to speak the truth, we speak the truth, because we believe in God – it honors and magnifies Him
  - e. When the Word of God says, “if you love Me, you will keep my commandments”, we take it seriously and put them into practice – it honors and magnifies Him

God doesn't want our empty religion. He may hate our sacrifices, despise our “worship services”, and abhor our fellowship activities. For, if we do these things while ignoring His Word, loving what He hates, pursuing that which He redeemed us from, chasing after the very things for which Christ died, we cannot expect Him to feel honored, for we have not honored Him. So, let us cast aside our empty religion! Let us actually be grateful for His grace! Let us proclaim His wondrous deeds to the world while working deeds of righteousness, of justice, of grace to those around us in order to honor the One who saved us at such a cost to Himself.

Let us commit ourselves, much like a Lover to his Beloved, to honor and magnify our Beloved Savior who gave Himself for our sins. It is not legalistic to commit ourselves in such a way. It is love, true love, real love, electrifying love, that commits oneself to honor. Let us release the flow of justice, washing away all that would live by our own standards and be filled with the roaring whitewater of God's holy life, so that all people might see the living waters overflowing in us and fall on their faces in grateful worship to God.