

## **Let Justice Flow**

*Let Justice Flow*

**Amos 5:18-6:14**

Pastor Bryan Clark

So last week we learned that we have teenagers sleeping under bridges; we've got kids growing up in poverty that aren't going to make it through school. You've got heartache and despair in the streets and ask the question, "What are we going to do?" Well this morning we're going to turn a corner just a little bit. I think, in order to understand the book of Amos, you have to *feel* the book of Amos. I think that's true with all of the prophets. The message is very intense; you can't just read through it like you're reading the latest book of fiction. You have to feel the pain; you have to feel the level of intensity; you have to feel what breaks the heart of God. As a matter of fact, the very first week of the Amos series I asked us the question, "How do you think God feels about what we have done to His world? What breaks the heart of God?" And if these things break the heart of God, shouldn't they break our heart? I asked the question, "Is it possible we've just become so used to the world in which we live, we just walk on by and don't even notice the very things that break the heart of God?"

The book of Amos was written to the oppressors; it's written to the abusers. There's a high level of intensity. Now I would never imagine that the people gathered in this room are the oppressors, are the abusers. I think it's possible we need to have our eyes opened a little bit to the pain and suffering and the struggles around us but I think, at the end of the day, we are people who want to do the right thing. We want to love good; we want to hate evil; we want to do justice; we want to be people of compassion and generosity. So we're going to turn just a little bit. This week and next week are the last two weeks of Amos and Amos continues to target his message toward the oppressors and the abusers. We're five weeks in. I think we get how this feels; I think we get the heart of God; I think we get the level of intensity. And so I want to shift our attention a little bit more to what he has to say to the remnant—to those who want to do justice, to those who want to do the right thing. I think we probably would all agree that even though we may not be the oppressors and the abusers, certainly everything that was happening in Israel in the days of Amos is happening in our country today in some way or another. We're equally as oppressive; we're equally as abusive to the weak and the vulnerable and the at-risk. So God continues to call out a remnant to do justice. We're going to move fairly quickly through the message to the oppressors. It's fairly straight forward; it's not real complicated—and then think a little bit more about, "What is He saying to the remnant that He's calling out?" With that in mind, turn with us to Amos, Chapter 5, and we're going to pick it up in verse 18. It says:

**Alas, you who are longing for the day of the LORD,  
For what purpose *will* the day of the LORD *be* to you?  
It *will be* darkness and not light;  
As when a man flees from a lion  
And a bear meets him,  
Or goes home, leans his hand against the wall  
And a snake bites him.  
*Will not the day of the LORD be darkness instead of light,  
Even gloom with no brightness in it?* (\*NASB, Amos 5:18-20)**

He opens this discussion with the word **Alas**—could be translated *woe*. It's basically a Hebrew word that's a cry. It's a cry for someone who is mourning the loss of a loved one. So the question is, "Who died?" He told us last week, "The virgin is dead." The virgin was an image in Hebrew of a young woman who was about to blossom into everything that God created a woman to be, full of hopes and dreams and all that lies ahead. Israel viewed themselves as this virgin, that they were blossoming into everything that they could imagine. But God comes along and says that the virgin lies dead on the battlefield; she will not blossom into the young woman she was created to be. He asked the question, "Why are you **longing for the day of the Lord?**" **The day of the Lord** is a phrase that a lot of the prophets pick up on. It's discussed a lot in various End Times Eschatological Systems. But it's helpful to know Amos was the originator of the term. This is the first time a prophet uses the term. And in Amos' context he's simply referring to a belief that the Hebrew people had: that one day God would come back; He would judge the nations and He would make things right. And in their minds they couldn't wait for that day because God was going to come crush everybody else and that would be their day and everything would be made right. And in their minds they would not be held accountable for anything they had done. But Amos is asking the question, "*Why are you thinking like that because, for you, the day of the Lord will not be brightness; it will not be deliverance; it will be darkness and despair because you will be held accountable for your abuse and oppression of the poor.*"

He gives two very simple pictures. He says they're like someone who's *running from a lion* and, about the time you think you've escaped the lion, *you run into a bear and the bear eats you*. Or you're like *the person who is fleeing and you get to your house; you shut the door; you lean against the wall; you feel like you're finally safe; and a snake bites you and you die*. And while they think the day of the Lord is going to be their rescue, it's not going to be and it's going to be a time of darkness for them. Verse 21:

**"I hate, I reject your festivals,  
Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,  
I will not accept *them*;  
And I will not *even* look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.  
Take away from Me the noise of your songs;  
I will not even listen to the sound of your harps."** (Vs. 21-23)

Now this has come up several times in Amos, where the people six days a week go out and crush and oppress the weak and the vulnerable but then they show up; they do their religious thing and believe that everything's fine between them and God. And God says, "I've had it up to here with that stuff! I don't want to see it anymore; I don't want to hear it anymore." As a matter of fact he says, "*I hate it; I'm not even going to watch anymore* and when you sing songs, *it's just noise to me; I'm just not going to listen anymore.*" He's had it with their hypocrisy.

Think of it this way: All across our country this Sunday morning our churches will be filled with people who all week long they crush and oppress the weak and the vulnerable. They dramatically advantage themselves by disadvantaging others. Yet they'll show up; they'll do their religious thing to be noticed by others and convince themselves that everything's right between me and God. But the text reminds us how God feels about that. He says, "I hate that! Just stop doing it. I'm not going to watch; I'm not going to listen I'm not going to pay attention anymore," which raises the question in the context of Amos, "What is true worship?" Verse 24:

**“But let justice roll down like waters  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”**

This is the verse from which we get the title of our series, *Let Justice Flow*. It’s built on our two important Hebrew words: Let justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tzadeqah*) flow from the people of God. He’s calling out the remnant; He’s creating the picture of a river that flows from the people of God into a dry and thirsty land and brings much needed rest and relief. One of the interesting parts of the text is that the part that’s addressed to the nation is obviously in the plural, but when he shifts to the remnant, it shifts to the singular. So the verb in verse 23—*take*—and the two verbs in verse 24—*let* and *roll*—are all in the singular. It reminds us that even in a culture of oppression and abuse, God calls out a remnant that love good and hate evil, that want to do the right thing, that want to let justice and righteousness flow through the streets in the name of Jesus. Verse 25:

**“Did you present Me with sacrifices and grain offerings in the wilderness for forty years, O house of Israel?”**

The statement has an implied, “No”. It’s talking about when the Hebrew people wandered in the wilderness for forty years before they entered the land of promise and they were characterized by pagan idolatry. I think Amos is just saying this is a problem that has defined the people of God for a very long time.

**“You also carried along Sikkuth your king and Kiyyun, your images, the star of your gods which you made for yourselves.  
Therefore, I will make you go into exile beyond Damascus,” says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts. (Vs. 26-27)**

Those two words are basically the words for shrine and the word for pedestal. He’s talking about instruments of pagan worship. Everywhere you go you take your shrine and you take your little pedestal so you can put your little idols on them. He’s just saying this is what has defined you as the people, and God has reached His limit. Chapter 6:

**Woe to those who are at ease in Zion,  
And to those who *feel* secure in the mountain of Samaria,  
The distinguished men of the foremost of nations,  
To whom the house of Israel comes. (6:1)**

Verse 1 of Chapter 6 is very interesting. The message is to those who consider themselves to be the movers and shakers. There’s a lot of sarcasm when he talks about **the distinguished men**, those who have set themselves up as the movers and shakers, the people of honor, the people to be admired, the people who are running the show *and all Israel come to them*. In other words he’s saying to them, “**Woe to those** *who have convinced yourselves that you are something*.” It’s an interesting thing to think about in our country as it relates to how we define those who are the movers and shakers, those who are the celebrities, those who are the people of honor, those who think they have arrived and it’s their opinion that ultimately matters. And God says, “Woe to those who think you’re the ones in charge.” Because the message is basically, “I’m God and I’m going to squish you like a bug.” That’s the Bryan Clark version. (laughter) That’s pretty much what He’s saying. He says:

**Go over to Calneh and look,  
And go from there to Hamath the great,  
Then go down to Gath of the Philistines.  
Are they better than these kingdoms,  
Or is their territory greater than yours?  
Do you put off the day of calamity,  
And would you bring near the seat of violence? (Vs. 2-3)**

What Amos is saying to the movers and the shakers—the people who have set themselves up as those who are in charge—is, “Hey, you might want to do a little regional tour of what I’ve done to your neighbors, because your neighbors at one time thought they were the movers and shakers and they were in charge and they were all powerful and I’ve squished them. So take yourselves a little tour and ask yourselves, ‘Do you really think you can hold up better than they did?’ ” He’s really saying, “Do you think you can challenge God and win?” Verse 4:

**Those who recline on beds of ivory  
And sprawl on their couches,  
And eat lambs from the flock  
And calves from the midst of the stall,  
Who improvise to the sound of the harp,  
And like David have composed songs for themselves,  
Who drink wine from sacrificial bowls  
While they anoint themselves with the finest of oils,  
Yet they have not grieved over the ruin of Joseph. (Vs. 4-6)**

Again this is a section—we’ve seen it several times—that talks about the gross opulence of these people. This ridiculously luxurious lifestyle, every statement in there is a gross overstatement of the way these people are living their lives. In an ancient world, when you killed an animal to eat it, it’s not like you take it down to the local butcher and he butchers it and packages it and you put it in the freezer and you have it for six months. You have it for that day and then the rest goes to waste. So nobody sacrificed an animal every single day. But that’s what they were doing—everyday is a new animal. You have so much of this expensive wine, you don’t drink it out of a goblet; you drink it out of a bowl. You live this ridiculously luxurious life, yet it never bothers you that right outside there are people dying in the streets. You have accumulated your wealth on the backs of the poor and the needy and the vulnerable. And you have advantaged yourself at the gross disadvantage of the community. You have destroyed the social fabric of the community and it doesn’t bother you at all. That’s what he’s saying and for that offense God says, “I’m going to stop it.” Verse 7:

**Therefore, they will now go into exile at the head of the exiles,  
And the sprawlers’ banqueting will pass away.**

The best way to understand verse 7 is God saying, “The party’s over! No more.” Verse 8:

**The Lord GOD has sworn by Himself, the LORD God of hosts has declared:  
“I loathe the arrogance of Jacob,  
And I detest his citadels;  
Therefore, I will deliver up *the* city and all it contains.”  
And it will be, if ten men are left in one house, they will die.  
Then one’s uncle, or his undertaker, will lift him up to carry out *his* bones from the house, and he will say to the one who is in the innermost part of the house, “Is anyone**

**else with you?” And that one will say, “No one.” Then he will answer, “Keep quiet. For the name of the LORD is not to be mentioned.”**

**For behold, the LORD is going to command that the great house be smashed to pieces and the small house to fragments. (Vs. 8-11)**

Very interesting image here. It's basically saying that when God comes along, if there are ten men in a house, they will all die. So the undertaker is going through the house carrying out the bodies and, in the most remote part of the house, he finds someone still alive hiding under the bed and the undertaker says, “Are you the only one in the house?” And he says, “I'm the only one in the house.” And he says, “Then we need to whisper because if God knows you're here, He'll kill you too!” It's just an image of absolute fear at the discipline of God. Verse 12

**Do horses run on rocks?  
Or does one plow them with oxen?  
Yet you have turned justice into poison  
And the fruit of righteousness into wormwood,**

The first two statements are absolutely absurd statements. When it talks about *horses running on the rocks*, it's not talking about running on the gravel—you know, running down the county road. It's talking about huge boulders and crags, basically the big boulders and rocks at the base of the mountains and saying, “Would you saddle up your horse and go for a gallop across those rocks?” and of course you'd say, “That's ridiculous; that's absurd.” Or is the farmer going to show up with his oxen and try to plow up the rocks in order to plant seeds there? And the answer is, “That's absurd.” And then God says, “Yet it's equally absurd that *you have taken justice and you have turned it into poison and you have taken righteousness and you've turned it into wormwood; you've turned it into bitterness*. You've taken the very thing that's meant to bring relief to people and you've turned it into poison; you've turned it into bitterness.” It's equally absurd in the eyes of God. Verse 13:

**You who rejoice in Lodebar,  
And say, “Have we not by our own strength taken Karnaim for ourselves?”**

Those are two cities. Amos intentionally mispronounces the first one—Lodebar—to a Hebrew word which, as mispronounced, means *nothing*. So the Hebrew people—the people of Israel—are saying, “Hey, we can do this in our own strength. We took this city.” And Amos says, “You know God is renaming that city; it was nothing.” The name of the other city means *horns*, which in the Hebrew word, was symbolic of strength, but God is saying, “Hey, you think you're tough because you took those two cities. I'm telling you, they're nothing. You can't fight God and win.”

**“For behold, I am going to raise up a nation against you,  
O house of Israel,” declares the LORD God of hosts,  
“And they will afflict you from the entrance of Hamath  
To the brook of the Arabah.” (vs. 14)**

Basically it's the same message that discipline is coming. Amos was around 750 BC; the time between 750 BC until the Assyrians conquered in 722 BC was a time of absolute misery—six different kings, three of them assassinated, total chaos from the time of Amos until the Assyrians came and wiped them out and hauled the survivors off into captivity. The verse that I'd like for us

to think a little bit more about is chapter 5, verse 24. It's the verse that's targeted to the remnant—that in the midst of oppression, in the midst of abuse, in the midst of injustice, God still calls out a remnant that loves good and hates evil, a remnant that wants to be defined by compassion, a remnant that wants to do the right thing. So we continue to wrestle with, “But what exactly does that mean?”

Well, let me give you just a few things to think about. First of all, if you're interested, next Sunday morning at 9:00 we're starting a class that's called *Let Justice Roll*. It's basically an opportunity for you to enter into more discussion, to look at Old Testament passages, to look at New Testament passages, to interact, and ask questions and discuss and talk. So if you're interested in that, it will be taught by Mark Mathewson; it starts next week at 9:00. You can register online or you can register by just calling the church office.

Second of all, next week is our last week in Amos. The following week, which is two weeks from today, the entire service will be dedicated to what we can do to make a difference. We're going to put forth two very powerful initiatives that are also very simple—things that anybody could think about getting involved in—that directly address the problems we saw last week in the video. So that whole week will be dedicated to thinking through, “What can we do?”

We're also going to line the halls with various organizations in our city that are professionals at dealing with these types of issues and they will represent their ministries and their organizations. You can talk to them; you can ask questions; you can interact with them; you can try to sort through what God might be calling you to do. So you have plenty of opportunity for that. But, again, it's helpful to think these are professionals that deal with this stuff every day, because this stuff is really complicated. What always happens is people are very well intended—“I'm going to go out and make a difference,” but you just run into one obstacle after another. It seems like you can't make any progress and people get discouraged and they quit. And rather than just winging it on your own, it would be much better to talk to people who really know what's going on. They know how the system works; they know what really makes a difference and to put our efforts into that which will produce better results.

So let me give you an example. A number of people have asked, when we talk about doing justice and compassion and all of that, “What are you saying? Are you saying that when people are parked, you know, on the driveway outside of Wal-Mart or Target or a place like that and they have a cardboard sign and they need money, is what you're saying is we should give them money?” Not necessarily. In talking to Lincoln Police, they know who most of these people are; they know where they live; they know what they do. Most of them aren't what they represent themselves to be. You can drive by, throw them a couple bucks and feel better about it to deal with your own guilt. But you still have to process: for every dollar that goes to someone who misrepresents their situation, it's a dollar that doesn't go to somebody that legitimately has a need. So it gets complicated; things aren't always what they seem. Even if you do bump into a legitimately homeless person, the experts would tell you, “Don't give them money.” Most would say you're just simply contributing to their destruction. They'll just probably take it and turn around and buy more alcohol. What the experts would tell you is to come alongside them and say, “If you would walk with me down to this restaurant, I would love to buy you lunch and eat lunch with you and spend some time with you. I'd like to talk to you; I'd like to get to know you; I'd like to listen to your story. In the name of human dignity I would like to treat you like a person. Now you think about it. One of the reasons we like to just throw a couple of dollars at someone is because we have guilt and we want to do something, but we don't really want to invest much of ourselves. It takes sixty seconds to throw a dollar at somebody and keep on walking and then we feel a little bit better. It takes a significant part of

ourselves to invest time in the name of human dignity to say, “I genuinely care; I want to listen to you; I want to know your story; I want to make a difference in your life. That’s a whole different picture.

When we think about, “What is the solution?,” I want to remind us again—and this is very delicate because it feels so political, but we have to remind ourselves—that, at the end of the day, the government is not the solution—never has been, never will be. Now that’s not an attack on the government. There are a lot of you that work in government offices and you are the church in a very important place and you work very hard and you’re bringing justice to your role, I understand that; that’s not what I’m saying. I also think the closer the government gets to its people, the more local it gets, the more accountable people are, the more it’s good people trying to do the right thing. But when you’re talking about huge government—when you’re talking about the federal government—that’s about politics; that’s about agendas; that’s about re-elections. That’s about special interest groups; it’s about a whole bunch of stuff that even frustrates people that are in the government. But, at the end of the day, the Bible says that the role of the government is: *to promote good and punish evil*. Everything beyond that is up for debate—and it will be debated until we all go to our graves.

The problem is, when we get it in our heads that we just need to elect somebody else; we just need to change some government program—that somehow that’s going to solve all the problems—so we just sit back and watch and we fail to remember that God didn’t call the government. He called the people of God, in the name of Jesus, to let justice flow, to get involved in people’s lives and genuinely make a difference.

One of the interesting ways to process this is: I think it’s interesting what’s happened to the Civil Rights Movement. If you go back and you study the strategy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and what he talked about and what he believed, he did not believe government would solve the problem. He believed that people would solve the problem; he was all about the grass roots and he was primarily about the community of faith—that in the name of Jesus we would treat one another with dignity, as people made in the image of God and, from the streets, change would come. Now fifty years later the thing has almost turned completely upside-down—where everybody thinks the government’s going to change that. In the words of the imminent theologian, the Outlaw Josey Wales, “Governments don’t live with people; people live with people.” And he’s right about that; it’s the people that live with their neighbors; it’s the people that live in the communities; it’s the people that rub shoulders with people in pain that ultimately make the difference. We have to understand we have to own this—this is our calling; this is our responsibility—to make a difference in our community.

There’s a story that’s been around a long time. I don’t know if it’s true or not but it certainly makes the point. It’s a story about a father and his son that are at the beach and the waves are coming in and are leaving starfish littering the beach. As the tide goes out, of course these starfish are stranded on the beach and obviously die. And so here’s this little boy going up and down the beach and he picks up the starfish and he wings it into the ocean and he picks up another one and he wings it into the ocean and his father asks him, “Son, what are you doing?” And the son tells him what he’s doing and the father says, “Son, look up and down the beach. There’s thousands of starfish; you can’t possibly make a difference.” And the little boy picks up a starfish, wings it into the ocean and says, “Dad, it made a difference to that one.”

We talked last week that, when we look at the big picture, we get overwhelmed and when we get overwhelmed, we get paralyzed and we do nothing. You have to break it down to *people*. You have to see people; you have to see their pain; you have to see the reality of the people around you and understand that letting justice flow like water to a dry and thirsty land is viewing this by changing people's lives—one life at a time. That's how we'll ***Let Justice Flow***.

*Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You love us. You love us and You call us to do justice in a dry and thirsty land. Lord, give us the courage to do what we need to do. Give us the wisdom to know what it is that we need to do. And, Lord, in the name of Jesus, may justice flow into a dry and thirsty land. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

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## **Let Justice Flow**

*A Study in Amos*

**Let Justice Flow**

Amos 5:18-6:14

Pastor Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. How has this series in Amos stirred your thinking? What “injustices” have you identified in your world that you think are simply unacceptable?
2. Have you thought of some simple practical things you can do to “let justice flow” in your areas of influence?
3. When we look at issues like slavery in Great Britain or here in the U.S. or the civil rights movements of the 1960’s or in Hitler’s Germany, we find ourselves asking where were the people of God in all this? Is it possible that the issue that will define this chapter in American history and the issue that will cause people to ask, “where were the people of God in all this” is our greed as a nation? Why or why not?

### **Bible Study**

1. Review Amos 5:1-17. How is Amos able to balance both the sure judgment of God on Israel and the truth that those who seek God will live? How might this give us some perspective on how to view our role as Christians today?
2. Clearly we all have areas where we could do better in how we treat people in the name of justice. However, it’s unlikely most of us are guilty of the gross abuse and oppression of the weak and vulnerable that defined Israel in the days of Amos. It may be helpful to view ourselves as the remnant called out to do justice in the midst of a corrupt and greedy world. With this in mind read Amos 5:18-6:14. What is God saying to the oppressors?
3. How were the oppressors using the “Day of the LORD” to comfort themselves in spite of their sins. What does God say about that? How might we misuse theology to avoid dealing with sin in our lives?

4. Is worship ultimately about showing up and going through the motions or something more? What did God say about the religious rituals the oppressors were engaged in? How did God define true worship in the context of Amos (hint: v. 24)?
5. What does it mean to “let justice flow down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”? What does that mean for you?

## **Application**

1. What are some practical things you can do to think through what doing justice might look like in your work, school or neighborhood?
2. The “Let Justice Roll” class begins March 4 at 9:00 am for those wanting to dig deeper into doing justice and what that might mean to us today.
3. March 10/11 will be dedicated to promoting opportunities for people to explore in order to get more involved in doing justice in our community. Does it make more sense to work with those people and organizations that have experience in these matters rather than just doing our own thing? Why or why not?