

Sermon for September 18, 2016 – 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

Amos 8:4-7 (NIV84)

Theme: God hates Greed

- 1) *It corrupts our worship.*
- 2) *It hurts those the LORD wants us to love.*
- 3) *Only in Christ can we overcome.*

<sup>4</sup> *Hear this, you who trample the needy and do away with the poor of the land, <sup>5</sup> saying, "When will the New Moon be over that we may sell grain, and the Sabbath be ended that we may market wheat?"-- skimping the measure, boosting the price and cheating with dishonest scales, <sup>6</sup> buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat. <sup>7</sup> The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget anything they have done. (Amos 8:4-7 NIV84)*

What thoughts went through your mind when you heard today's sermon text? Did you think about all the Wall Street scandals over the past two decades; and say to yourself: "Corporate America certainly needs to take this warning seriously!"

But what about you? Don't you need to take this warning seriously too? At first glance we might think: "But, I don't take advantage of the poor. I don't cheat on my taxes. I conduct my business with integrity. This text is meant for the world, not a Christian like me, right?"

But, here's the thing: when the LORD had Amos originally pen this text, it wasn't for the pagan world. He gave this prophecy to God's people, who had strayed from his commands and stumbled down the never ending rabbit hole of greed. Now, even though you may not be like the Israelites described in our text, you still have a selfish, sinful nature inside of you: one that entices you to be greedy. And, as we will learn in our sermon for today: **God Hates Greed.** 1) *It corrupts our worship.* 2) *It hurts those the LORD wants us to love.* 3) *Only in Christ can we overcome.*

Part One: It corrupts our worship.

Our sermon text was originally written to the people living in the northern kingdom of Israel around 750 BC. Under King Jeroboam II's leadership, the population felt very secure and their economy prospered. Yes, humanly speaking, it seemed like an excellent time to live in the northern kingdom. But there was a hidden rot under this façade of prosperity: idolatry, wasteful extravagance, immorality, oppression of the poor, and economic corruption ran rampant. Even though the Israelites were physically prosperous, they were spiritually poor. Their religious fervor was all just a show: going through the motions of worship without true faith.

The LORD was concerned with what he saw: the people's greed had turned their hearts away from him. Evidence of this fact was how they treated their poorer country men. God had given them the commands: "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,*"<sup>i</sup> and "*love your neighbor as yourself.*"<sup>ii</sup> He specifically commanded them: *be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.*<sup>iii</sup>

But the Israelites, over time, began to neglect these commands. Why? If we take an honest look inside our own hearts, I think we can figure it out: they coveted the extravagant luxuries other nations were enjoying around them. Businessmen wanted the same profits their non-Israelite counterparts had. But how could they get those things by keeping God's rules? Not only did they lose money helping those in need, but they weren't allowed to work during the Sabbath. That really cut into their profits! So, making the excuse that they had to watch out for number one lest they become poor themselves, many stopped helping the needy as they ought. Greedy to achieve their goals, the weekly Sabbath day became a burden instead of a blessing. They went through all the motions of worship – thinking: "Come on: Let's get this day over with. I will have done my duty to God, and then I can get on with getting the things I want to enjoy."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, have you ever approached worship with thoughts like: "Come on, let's get this over with. I have stuff to do"? Maybe it was on Thanksgiving, and all you could think about was the early bird sales you were missing." Maybe it was before an early Packer game or some other event you wanted to get too: your desire for something else made your worship like that of Adam and Eve's son Cain who killed his brother Abel because he was jealous that God didn't accept his worship. Do you know why God didn't accept Cain's worship? It's because it wasn't done out of faith; and neither is our worship, when our minds are on things like money, sports, leisure, work or anything else instead of the LORD.

"But," someone might say, "at least I come to church. That's better than not coming at all, right?" No, actually it's not. They are both equally sinful in God's sight. Both reveal a selfish heart. God hates it when people go through the motions of worship without truly listening, thinking and believing in him.

You may have never tried to cheat the poor, but who of us can claim that we have never worshipped God with a divided heart? Our sinful nature is selfish: it likes thinking about the things that can give it pleasure rather than on the LORD. God hates greed. Why? First and foremost because it corrupts our worship of him. The person, object or thing we are greedy for steals God's place in our hearts. It becomes an idol. Is it therefore any wonder that God's Word encourages believers: *Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry?*<sup>iv</sup>

Yes, God hates greed. It corrupts our worship of him. It also hurts those God wants us to love.

Part Two: *It hurts those the LORD wants us to love.*

The Israelites, to whom Amos originally gave this message, had drifted far from the LORD. Commanded to help the poor, they took advantage of them instead. They used uneven scales,

bad weights and dirty grain – all with the hope of making a little more money. And if someone borrowed money to buy sandals but couldn't afford paying them back? Well, they were so keen on getting their money that they would rather see their fellow Israelite brother sold into slavery than forgive that debt.

Their greed hurt the very people God commanded the Israelites to love: the poor, weak, sick, injured and defenseless. God was so disgusted by their greed that he said: *The LORD has sworn by the Pride of Jacob* (that is, himself): *"I will never forget anything they have done."*

Wow, can you imagine God saying such a judgement over you? Thankfully we never have to worry about that, right? Why not? Because none of us would ever be that greedy – selling our countrymen into slavery just to get more money.

While it may be true that we have never gone to that extreme, that doesn't mean that our greed hasn't hurt the people God commanded us to love. Consider Luther's explanation of the seventh Commandment: "You shall not steal. What does this mean? We should fear and love God so that we may not take our neighbor's money or property, nor get them with bad products or deals, but help him to improve and protect his property and business."

Have you ever been at a garage sale and saw an item that was worth far more than the person was asking? What did you do: tell him its true value? Or did you think to yourself, "He should have known better," and buy it from him without breathing a word of its true value? If you did the latter, is that keeping God's commandment the way Luther explained it?

Or what if someone less fortunate than us is selling what they have at a very inexpensive price in order to pay their bills. Do you take advantage of their misfortune, or pay them what is fair?

How about if a store makes an honest mistake – advertising an item for \$2 instead of \$20? Do you insist that they sell you the product for the advertised price – even though you know that the \$2 would not cover their cost?

In our business dealings, are we always looking out for the person we are negotiating with, and not just our own interests?

Or how about when we see a person in need: do we help them? Or do we say to ourselves: "He's probably just a schnook - taking advantage of the system" and turn a blind eye to him?

You see, God doesn't just call us to love our family and friends, he calls us to love all people – including our enemies.<sup>v</sup> The LORD would rather us be taken advantage of than take advantage of others.<sup>vi</sup> And why is that? Because, when we take advantage of others, we dishonor God's name. They will think: "What kind of God is the LORD, if his followers selfishly cheat, steal and only look out for themselves?" No, these kinds of actions dishonor God – hurting the very people our Savior calls us to love. And can any of us claim to be sinless in this regard?

So where does that leave us? Are we doomed to face the same judgment Israel faced – when the LORD swore: *"I will never forget anything they have done"*? We certainly deserve the same

punishment. So where does that leave us? I don't know about you, but it leaves me at the foot of the cross – begging Christ for forgiveness. Why? Because, only in Christ, can we overcome the greed that lurks within our nature.

Part Three: Only in Christ can we overcome.

The LORD certainly knew about the sinful corruption of our hearts. He could see that there was no way we could either pay for our sins or overcome the selfishness of our nature. We would be helplessly lost in sin, unless he did something about it. And, God be praised, He did do something about it: He sent his one and only Son into the world to live the perfect life we all failed to live in order to win the righteousness we need to have to gain eternal life. Jesus showed perfect love to God. How? By going to the Synagogue every Sabbath to both learn and teach His Father's Word. He showed perfect love to his fellow man by feeding the hungry, healing the sick and, most importantly, teaching the way of salvation. And when the time came for Him to suffer for our sins on the cross, Jesus didn't shrink away from doing that. Out of great love towards both God and us, He willingly offered himself up for our sins.

Jesus glorified God's saving name by showing unselfish love to God and the world. Because of this fact all our sins have been paid for in full. The LORD no longer remembers the sins of those who cling to him in faith. Why? Because He remembered them when Jesus was on the cross and punished him for them all. We are free. More than that, the LORD has also sent the Holy Spirit to create a new person in our hearts – one that wants to love others as God himself loved us. Yes, our new man wants to love people – not because it fears God's wrath or wants to earn heaven. It already knows that it has heaven as a free gift. No, our new man wants to love others simply because it rejoices in the love it has received from God. This new man loves like Jesus loves – as St. Paul once said: *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*<sup>vii</sup>

Only in Christ can we overcome the greed that lurks with in our sinful flesh. Why is that? Because our Savior God, who absolutely hates greed, took our sins upon himself to suffer and die for them all. More than that, he has given us a new man – one that is completely selfless and loving. By means of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit directs this new man and helps him overcome the selfishness of our sinful nature. He reminds us of God's love for us – a love that made us his children in Holy Baptism. How can we not worship God with genuine love, all in response to the great love he showed us? How can we not love our fellow man – doing all we can to help him? No, we will never be perfect in this life, but with the forgiving help our God offers us we can overcome the greed he hates – all to the glory of his name. We can only do this in Christ, for he already overcame our greed for us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 6:5 NIV84

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 19:18 NIV84

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 15:11 NIV84

<sup>iv</sup> Colossian 3:5 NIV84

<sup>v</sup> C.f. Luke 6:35

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<sup>vi</sup> C.f. Luke 6:29, 1 Corinthians 6:7, 1 Thessalonians 4:6

<sup>vii</sup> Galatians 2:20 NIV84