

Amos 5:10-13

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/amos/amos-5/amos-510-13/>

Amos once again accuses Israel of practicing injustice, which violates His covenant with Israel. For this reason, God will judge His covenant people.

This section resumes the denunciation begun in verse 7. Here the prophet cites several other reasons why the LORD would judge Israel. The culture of Israel has come to hate truth and integrity. Amos calls them out, saying, *They hate him who reproveth in the gate, and they abhor him who speaks with integrity.*

The *gate* of the city was the spot in Israel where judges or rulers would often administer justice. Some Israelite leaders such as elders would normally assemble at the *gate* of their towns to hear witnesses and decide on the right disciplinary actions. An example of this can be found in Deuteronomy 21:18–21, where parents are told to deal with a rebellious son by taking him to the elders in the gate. The job of the judges was to judge righteously, according to what was true and right, according to the law (Deuteronomy 16:18-20).

But at this point justice is despised. People do not seek the truth. *They hate him who reproveth in the gate.* They just want their own way. They are fine with bribes, but hate what is true. They are fine with lies, but *abhor him who speaks with integrity.* If someone holds them to a standard of truth, these leaders will *hate him.*

Moreover, the Israelite oppressors had begun to *impose heavy rent on the poor and exact a tribute of grain from them.* The covenant law required them to treat others as they wanted to be treated, and to love their neighbor as they loved themselves (Leviticus 18:19). This abuse of the poor is a gross violation of the covenant to which they had agreed. The law of God's covenant with Israel had numerous provisions requiring dealing with the poor justly. The various laws were designed to prevent a permanent under-class, including a provision that required those who had become so destitute they entered slavery to be freed after six years, and be given seed capital to start over again (Deuteronomy 15:12-13). The law states:

“For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’”
(Deuteronomy 15:11)

The law recognized there will always be people down on their luck. But they were not to be held down, but lifted up. There was to be no permanent underclass. There was to be a path back to prosperity. This covenant law is also being violated. To *impose heavy rent on the poor* places them in a permanent state of poverty. Rather than help them get started again, they are being exploited.

The well-off *exact a tribute of grain from them.* It was the custom of kings in that day to cause conquered kingdoms to pay an annual *tribute* to avoid getting trounced by them. An example of

this can be found in Genesis 14. When the five kings of the Jordan Valley “rebelled” by ceasing to pay their tribute, they were attacked by the king to whom they had been paying tribute, along with his allies (Genesis 14:4-9). The picture might be of the rich treating their neighbors as though they were tyrants oppressing a conquered people. They are oppressing instead of caring for the poor by loving their neighbor as themselves and helping them get out of poverty, as required by God’s covenant law. The conquering king desires to keep conquered kingdoms under his dominion, so he can continue to extract from them. The wealthy of Israel are doing likewise with the poor of Israel. Then they are using their ill-gotten treasures to build *houses of well-hewn stone*.

God’s covenant law made it very clear that wealth was to come from mutual collaboration, not exploitation. God wanted Israel to prosper. But He forbade envy and exploitation. The law commanded each person to love his neighbor as himself, to treat others as he wanted to be treated. This exploitation was the opposite of what God commanded. “Justice” is all things working together according to design. The wealthy had violated the design of God’s covenant. The covenant was designed to demonstrate the immense advantage of collaboration (love) over exploitation (hate). Israel was to be a priestly nation to the other nations, to show them this way. But they had failed their covenant task. They were now exploiting the poor to build *hewn stone* houses for themselves.

In ancient Israel, many of the houses used rough fieldstones in construction (also called ashlar). Ashlar masonry designates stones cut and dressed on all six sides, usually cuboid in shape. Often the foundation was stone while the superstructure was of sun-dried mud brick. This elegant architecture was only accessible to the very wealthiest of Israel. But they did not stop at using their ill-gotten gain to purchase luxury for themselves.

In addition to building those elegant houses, the rich in Amos’s days took advantage of the poor to plant *pleasant vineyards*. But since those rich men acquired their *hewn-stone houses* and *pleasant vineyards* at the expense of the poor, they would now be judged. God would deprive them of their ill-gotten luxuries. They would *not live in* those houses and would *not drink their wine* (Deuteronomy 28:30). God would see that the oppression they brought upon others would come back onto their own heads.

Speaking on God’s behalf, Amos continued his indictment of the oppressors and said, *For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great*. The prophet used the terms *transgressions* (rebellion) and *sins* together to emphasize the fact that the oppressors had committed great sins against the LORD. They knew what to do; they had the covenantal laws of God. They knew they were supposed to allow the poor the opportunity to get back on their feet. But they kept them down, and refused to follow the righteous path of God’s covenant law.

Amos proceeded to list three of those sins—each of which clearly shows the wicked culture that had developed in Israel. The first *sin* is oppression of the innocent. Amos said, *You who distress the righteous*. They *distress* any who are actually *righteous*. Amos mentioned in verse 10 that Israel had arrived at a point where they *hate him who reproves in the gate and they abhor him who speaks with integrity*. They hate anyone willing to speak the truth, and follow God’s ways.

When they encountered those who told the truth or sought justice, they sought to bring *distress* upon these who were *righteous*.

The second *sin* committed by those with economic and political power in Israel was that they *accepted bribes*. To take a *bribe* means to accept a payment to render an unfair decision. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses warned the Israelite judges against taking a bribe because “a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous” (Deuteronomy 16:19). In Amos’s days the leaders in Israel took this commandment for granted. They constantly perverted justice, declaring guilty the innocent people, and favoring those who had the means to pay bribes. This second sin of three goes with the first, in that anyone who was *righteous*, who stood up for justice, would pose a threat to the ill-gotten income stream of the wicked. So the wicked would desire to use their power to *distress the righteous* and shut them up, but were happy to take a *bribe* and pervert justice.

The final *sin* listed by Amos was that Israel *turned aside the poor in the gate*. They denied the poor a fair hearing before judges (Amos 2:7). They prevented the poor from pleading their cases in the “courtroom.” This supports their other misdeeds. If the *poor* could appeal to the provisions of God’s covenant law prohibiting their unjust treatment, then they might get relief, and interrupt the income of their wealthy abusers. So the wealthy saw that the *poor* were *turned aside* when they came for justice. Either their day in court was denied, or their case was perverted. In doing this, these evil men would maintain their income stream from bribes and oppression.

Amos concluded this section by saying, *Therefore at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time*. The level of corruption had gotten so bad that for the righteous, the *prudent*, those who had good sense and discernment, refused to speak up for the less privileged because they judged a) it wouldn’t do any good and b) it came with too high a price. When it gets this bad, when the *prudent keeps silent*, refraining from speaking the truth, then *it is an evil time*. Verse 12 told us that anyone willing to speak out would have *distress* heaped upon them. Amos was an exception, because he bravely denounced evil and wickedness in the Israelite land because he was called by God to do so.

This is *an evil time*, when those with power oppress those without power. When the truth is hated, and bribes and lies are loved. It is an *evil time* when the economy revolves around oppression rather than mutual cooperation. Israel has developed a culture of oppression, just like their neighbors. God gave them a covenant to lead them to be self-governing. To treat one another with respect. To honor the property and persons of their neighbors. To respect and care for their families as with their own. To love others as they loved themselves. Israel was to be a priestly nation. They were to provide an example to other nations, to lead them into a better way to live. But now they had become fellow oppressors.

God had warned Israel that if they copied the oppressive lifestyle of the nations they dispossessed, then they would themselves be exiled from the land (Deuteronomy 4:25-27). Amos is giving them one last warning. Sadly, it will be a warning they will not heed.

Biblical Text

¹⁰ They hate him who reproveth in the gate,
And they abhor him who speaks *with* integrity.

¹¹ Therefore because you impose heavy rent on the poor
And exact a tribute of grain from them,
Though you have built houses of well-hewn stone,
Yet you will not live in them;

You have planted pleasant vineyards, yet you will not drink their wine.

¹² For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great,
You who distress the righteous *and* accept bribes

And turn aside the poor in the gate.

¹³ Therefore at such a time the prudent person keeps silent, for it is an evil time.