

## Recalibrating: Justice|Worship|Witness

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“A society at breaking point” (Reading: Amos 1:1-3.8 select verses) **SLIDE**

### **SLIDE: WHO DETERMINES THE STANDARDS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE? (AMOS 1:1-2)**

When I was a small child (1960) a metre as a standard unit of measurement was determined by the distance between two lines on a standard bar composed of an alloy of 90% platinum and 10% iridium. This standard metre **photo** is a replica of the International Meter Prototype pictured at the International Bureau of Weights and Measures, in Sevres, near Paris. Problem was, the standard was not exacting enough - it was affected by temperature, by cleaning, by movement, etc. Nowadays, the metre is much more complicated and is measured by a more sustained constant - light - the speed of light has become the measure of the standard metre! **Remove slide**

Social justice is a popular watchword in today's world. Cries of injustice echo in the halls of politics, resound in our streets and and perhaps even in our own domestic environments, whenever “situations” arise, at home or abroad, situations deemed “unacceptable in the 21st C”. But let me ask you, who determines such incidents are ‘unacceptable’? You may blame others, our leaders, our politicians, or whoever may be in the firing line. But have you considered that the measurement might be skewed by external influences - our culture, our own status, our changing moral compass? You see, in truth, the issues of social justice today are determined by our democratic societies - by people - by us. And that may be much more significant than what you first imagine... our standards might not be as accurate as we first thought.

In reality, God alone is the standard of all justice for the Christian... he alone is the measure. God is light. He upholds the only absolute standard and measure of what is just, and righteous and good.

“Biblical” justice then, as opposed to ‘social justice’, flows, not from our wavering opinions of right and wrong. Neither can it emanate from the fluctuating favouritism of democracy or personal prejudices of selfish choice. No, biblical standards of justice are grounded solidly in true love - love for the character of God - God is love - and love for our neighbour made in the image of God.

*“According to Social Justice, we are children of society, fashioned by its social constructions and the power of dynamics they maintain. According to the biblical worldview, people are children of God, fashioned in His divine image.” (James A. Lindsay & Mike Nayna)*

In social justice systems, we, the people of the world, are the arbiter of what is just.

In biblical justice, God is the final arbiter—only his standards can measure justice.

**SLIDE HOW ARE WE DOING IN MATTERS OF BIBLICAL JUSTICE? (AMOS 1:3-3:2)**

We know Amos is talking about biblical justice because he starts with 'The Word of the LORD'. It is true that 'these are the words of Amos' (1.1) but they do not originate with him - they come via him. These are none other than the Words of the LORD. "This is what the LORD says" is the constant refrain through the book. We are about to see that the Word comes to a specific people at a specific time in history. The words are directed specifically at Israel - a slippery term that can be a collective for all the people of God he called out of Egypt, or for that segment of the people of God (the northern kingdom; the ten tribes that defected to Jeroboam after Solomon died) who chose their own ways and their own gods rather than submit to the kings of Judah.

But please note, these are prophetic words. In other words, like *the Word of the Lord that stands forever* (1 Pet 1.25) these words are not bound to one historical period. Peter in the New Testament, 800 years after Amos had spoken, citing the prophets, says that '*This is the word that was preached to you.*' Yes, these words of the LORD, through his prophet Amos continue to speak to us, centuries later.

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God's Word of judgement views every society and every person from a position of perfect justice. Therefore, we quickly discover that these words of condemnation for an ancient people, condemn us also, for as Paul summarises it, '*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*' (Rom 3.23). And this is the story of Amos 1 and 2.

Every nation under heaven is held accountable to God: in the micro of our personal daily life choices and in the macro of our national and international policies and actions.

Amos address the nations (imagine him in the marketplace of Samaria?)

the NE/SW (Damascus/Aram & Gaza/Philistia) were recent enemies!

the NW/SE (Tyre/Phonicia & Bozrah/Edom) were ancient enemies!

the East (Rabbah/Ammon & Kerioth/Moab) were present enemies!

We can almost hear the people of Samaria, the capital of Israel, cheer! They delight in the prophet's condemnation of their neighbours, but they fail to see the same measurement will be brought to bear upon them!

And we do the same, do we not? We cultivate a "Look at them culture!" Look at how evil they are! Surely their wickedness is great! While we conveniently overlook our own shortcomings, failures and deliberate sinfulness and rebellion.

Amos calls out the social injustices that the LORD sees as he looks upon the nations surrounding the people of God... look with me at the Bible text...

- Violence and warfare (1.3)
- People trafficking and slavery (1.6)
- Racial violence, rage and unchecked anger (1.11)
- Disregard for the unborn and their mothers (1.13)
- Desecration of the dead (2.1)

Then, Amos particularly addresses the people of God with the Lord's perspective:

- Idolatry and rebellion (2.4)
- Corruption and bribery (2.6)
- Oppression and injustice (2.7a)
- Sexual immorality and pornography (2.7b)
- Misuse of god-given resources (2.8a)
- Drunkenness (2.8b)
- Pridefulness and self-reliance/confidence (2.9)
- Disregard for God's salvation, teaching and blessing (2.10-11)

**SLIDE: CAN OUR SOCIETIES STAND IN THE FACE OF GOD'S MEASURE OF JUSTICE?**  
**(2.11-3.2)**

The truth hurts. And we cannot hide from the truth.

**Is this not true, people of Israel!?**

Are the words of the prophets not true? How long will you go on silencing the prophet who speaks the word of the Lord? When will you stop twisting and perverting the call to holiness and to upright living (this was the vow of the Nazirite)?

- The excuses we make... upbringing, education sys, philosophical mores...
- The favour we think we are due... I've worked hard, I deserve it, I earned it...
- The privilege we believe we have earned... my entitlement, my rights, my life!

**Remove slide.** Then the prophet speaks again. Their ears prick up. They think perhaps he is saying something more favourable. But these fresh words come to the ears of the ancient Israelites as words misread, misheard as words wrongly mis-calibrated. As words that demonstrate the need for a complete recalibration of their

thinking, their hearing, their actions. These words sweep aside their assumptions, their pride, their abuse of grace, and salvation and sanctification.

*Hear this word, the LORD has spoken... (3.1-2; cf. 3.13; cf. 4.1; cf. 5.1)*

*"You only have I chosen..."* Ah yes, preach it! Preach it brother Amos. This is what we love to hear...

*"You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth"* Amen! We are God's people. We have received favour. We are not like those pagans, like those godless peoples that surround us. No. We are the blessed of the LORD... his people, his favoured ones.

But they have completely misread the measurement. They have utterly failed to recognise the truth about themselves. And so do we...

We are so far adrift from justice, from righteousness, from uprightness. We need to heed the words of another who said 'Let him who thinks they are standing, take heed, lest they fall!' The light of God's perfect standards has shown us up, has exposed our faults and has judged our relationship with him as wanting. It's not what it ought to be, is it?

For sure, Amos addresses those 'most favoured' but the address is one announcing punishment, the punishment of being cast out and being destroyed.

Their sins have piled up against them - for three sins, even for four sins, perhaps for seven sins there is the indication of their perfect sinfulness (if that is not a mixed message). Now is the time of their destruction. Now is the time of God's wrath and judgement. Now is the time to recognise that the Lion has roared. Now is the time to fear.

The end of chapter two describes what will come upon the nations who totter and stagger in the face of God's overpowering wrath. "I will crush you, you will not escape, your strength will not save you, you will not stand, you will not get away, you will not save your life, you will flee naked before me."

**SLIDE: WHAT CAUSES SOCIAL INJUSTICE TO BREAK OUT ACROSS THE SOCIETIES OF THE WORLD AND ACROSS OUR PERSONAL LIVES? (3.3)**

"Can two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?" (3.3)

Social injustice is not the problem - it is the symptom!

Social injustice in our world and in our lives personally is not the disease - it is only a symptom of the disease.

The atrocities of the people of God in Amos' day were shocking and distressing but they were not the main problem. The social injustices that they and other nations around them were perpetrating were not the problem as such albeit they were and are an abomination before the LORD God, the Holy One of Israel. **Remove slide.**

Yes, the problem was they had failed to measure their lives by the correct standard. They were using the wrong measurement. They were in desperate need of some major recalibration. They needed a completely new measurement system. **They had forgotten that biblical standards of justice are grounded solidly in true love - love for the character of God - God is love - and love for our neighbour made in the image of God.**

**They no longer loved God. They no longer worshipped him as God. They no longer walked with God or had fellowship with God, walking in the light as he is in the light.**

**Issues of social injustice are fundamentally a problem of who and what we worship.** When we turn away from the living God, the maker of heaven and earth, our Creator and Sustainer, and when we turn away from his ways, his will, and his wisdom, then we will inevitably see the outcomes... because our ways are not his way, our will is set against his will, and our wisdom cannot even match or reach to his foolishness!

**We do not 'walk in agreement' with God. We love our lifestyles more than God. We love our wealth and prosperity more than God. We even love our religious posturing more than we love God.** And it will not do... we finish wallowing in our own mire, and the increase of injustice and unrighteousness is the inevitable result.

**There is only one thing to do Israel.** There is only one solution and that is to **return to the LORD. When our lives are recalibrated in line with the justice of God, then our lives will be lived in his kingdom power.** When we commit our way to loving God and loving our neighbour as ourself, then we exercise the citizenship of heaven, we live for kingdom values, and we discover the kingdom of heaven is among us. This was the teaching of Jesus. But it can only ever be accomplished under the power and authority of the King, the LORD of all.

**Biblical justice is the heartbeat of every Christian who knows and follows King Jesus because his life, a life of perfect justice, is the very life that by faith in him, gives us life abundant, and promises us life eternal.**

Amen.