

Race and Poverty: Five-Session Study Guide

Session 2

Poverty Uncovered

Focal Passage: Amos 5:11–24

Background Passages: Amos 1:1; 2:6–8; 4:1–3; 7:14; 8:4–6; Psalm 40:1–8, 13–17

Session Synopsis: Amos calls us to an awareness of all the sickness of greed and selfishness. Do we think we can “buy” our way into heaven? God tells us through the words of the prophet that true faith is reflected not in right words, but in right living.

Key Verse: “Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps” (Amos 5:23).

Session Objectives

Participants will:

- recognize that we are accountable for our actions and cannot depend on “right rituals” to keep us faithful to God
- explore ways that our moralisms (words) and religiosity (rituals) have replaced faithful action
- identify one area of injustice (ways we neglect the poor and structures that create and maintain poverty) in which we are complicit

Preparation

- Prayerfully review the session and ask God to open your eyes and transform your life so that you might lead others.
- Carefully read the Scripture text and spend some time thinking about why it is difficult for churches to discuss important issues without falling into divisions of “conservative vs. liberal.” Spend some time in prayer that God will help you guide your group through this risky terrain.
- Make copies and gather materials as noted in Materials Needed.

Materials Needed

- Bibles
- copies of Participants’ Pieces for each person
- chalice and communion plate
- pencils

Gathering

Welcome participants and begin by sharing the following:

Bill McKibben writes that 75 percent of Americans (most of whom profess to be Christians) believe that the expression “God helps those who help themselves” comes from the Bible.¹ In fact, it doesn’t come from the Bible but from Benjamin Franklin, and it represents more of an American ethos of work and self-reliance than it does a biblical vision. U.S. Americans have strong convictions about work and individual achievement.

We are working longer hours than ever, and many of us feel like something is wrong if we are not busy. Sometimes we even feel ashamed when we are not productive because we have been so profoundly shaped by this work ethic.

Review together Participants' Piece 1, "The Bible and Work."

Advise participants that you will begin once again with quiet reflection, allowing the words of the psalmist to form your own cry for help. Invite them to notice how Psalm 40 is written from the perspective of one who is poor.

Invite the group to remember the poor and needy who have been exposed to us in the wake of Katrina, and also the poor in our own communities who have been hidden to us. (Have we looked away from them, in part, because we are embarrassed? Do we recoil at the poor?) As they remember our purpose in gathering, invite them to join together in prayer with "Psalm 40 Responsive Reading," Participants Piece #2.

The Missional Moment

Read aloud Amos 5:11–24, advising the group that you will be engaging the text in detail later, but for now the goal is to let the text to frame your discussion. Ask for no comment at this point except for questions of clarification.

Explain that: Amos describes a people with misplaced values and disordered desires. Their appetites are insatiable, and they value individual wealth and private possession over common wealth and justice. Review together the instructions on Participants' Piece #3 "What is Shameful? What is Celebrated?" and then allow time for participants to complete the rating.

Once all have completed the rating, invite discussion with the following:

- In our culture enormous value is placed on work, wealth, and industry.
- Shame is generally reserved for those who will not work.
- Did you notice excessively negative or shameful values assigned to any certain words?
- Did you assign positive values to words associated with wealth?
- Amos values justice and righteousness and seems to find it scandalous to ignore or trample the poor. Discuss these two different value systems (ours and that reflected in Amos).

The Missional Mandate

Please note that reading Amos is hazardous. The questions the prophet raises can cause internal and external conflict. It is important to demonstrate acceptance and to encourage participants to be gracious with one another, while also refusing to avoid the hard questions raised by this text. Also, you may not have time to cover all of the Bible background and discussion topics. So review the background and share what is most pertinent for your group, then for the discussion plan to either break up into four groups, assigning each group one topic to discuss and report on select only one or two questions to discuss with everyone.

Bible background:

The book of Amos is a collection of the prophecies of Amos. We are not sure who Amos was although he claims to be a common laborer (1:1; 7:14). The literary style is advanced, and the author is obviously familiar with broad political issues. Amos was one of the early prophets, active during the reign of Jeroboam II in Israel and Uzziah in Judah, circa 760 BCE. This places him some forty years before the fall of Samaria, the capital city, to Assyria (722/21 BCE) Indeed his message of judgment for the house of Israel seems to have been fulfilled as the Northern kingdom of Israel was never heard from again after the fall to Assyria.

The years during which Amos prophesied (the first half of the eighth century, BCE) were years of expansion and economic prosperity for the Northern kingdom of Israel. Due to weakness in foreign powers, Israel was able to expand its borders and control trade routes. The economy flourished. There is evidence that a new class of merchants arose, building large homes; but at the same time there is also evidence of a growing gap between rich and poor. Small farmers were dispossessed to make room for the expansion of large estates.³ (Remember that Amos purports to be a simple herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees, the business of the poor.) In other words, business was good . . . for the rich. It was a season of rapid growth, but Amos condemns this prosperity, claiming that it was built on the backs of the poor and that it benefits only the few (see especially 2:6–8; 4:1; 5:11–12; 8:4–6). He condemns a people who are so hungry for profit that they cannot wait for the Sabbath to end so they can return to their unjust business practices (see 8:4–6).

It is tempting to read Amos as a radical critique, but it is critical to remember that Amos thinks of himself as a *conservative*, reminding the people of their obligations under the law.⁴ Just as we saw clearly God's deep concern for the poor in last week's study of the law in Deuteronomy, we see that same concern in the judgment pronounced by Amos on a disobedient people. Amos makes a clear connection between economics and worship (see 2:7 and 5:21–24). The people are blind to the incongruity between the worship of God and the mistreatment of the poor.⁵ Amos grounds the problem in covetousness or unbridled economic desires (4:1–3). There is a warning against those who put their trust in military preparedness (5:9) and a warning that the temple has become "the king's sanctuary . . . a temple of the kingdom" (7:13) In other words, here is a picture of a religious establishment in service to the powers that be, blind to its own part in the disenfranchisement of the poor.

Our passage begins in the law courts where the poor have come seeking justice only to be hated for filing charges. The "gate" of Amos 5:10 is a reference to the place of court proceedings, and it seems that the poor were bullied when they came demanding justice.⁶ **Verses 14–15** challenge any easy, casual assumption that the Lord was with them. Rather, he suggested, if they want the presence of God, they must "seek good and not evil." According to Amos, people must never presume that God is on their side. **Verses 16–17** are written in the language of a funeral dirge, suggesting that Israel is fallen; there is nothing left to do but mourn. **Verses 18–20** introduce "the day of the LORD." By this is meant a future day when God would intervene on Israel's behalf. It is possible that

Israel's prosperity had prompted some to proclaim that the day of the Lord was near. To these it seemed obvious that God was pleased with Israel: Is not prosperity a sign that God is on our side? "Watch out," says Amos. The day of the Lord will be a day of judgment for the rich and vindication for the poor. In this, Amos's message anticipates Jesus who declared in a stunning reversal that "the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matt. 20:16). Finally, **verses 21–23** include strong language (hate and despise) from God regarding worship that has been disconnected from justice and righteousness. Right worship cannot be separated from right social relations. The *New Revised Standard Version* translation of verse 22, "I will not accept them," should read, "I will not smell them." Thus translated, the image becomes one of God shutting first nose, then eyes, then ears to our offensive worship.⁷

Topics for discussion:

1. The legal system.

- The passage begins in court. How are our poor treated in court? In our criminal justice system?
- "In 1971 there were fewer than 200,000 people in America's state and federal prisons. By 2001, that number had grown almost to 1.4 million, or close to a seven-fold increase. If local jails, youth facilities, military prisons, and other forms of imprisonment are included, on any given day over two million Americans are incarcerated. . . . This rate is the highest in the world."⁸ Which is a more pressing question of justice in our culture right now, tort reform or prison reform? What does your answer indicate about our cultural values?

2. Worship and obedience.

- The connection Amos makes between worship and economic matters is startling. In his view there does not seem to be any divide between how we worship and how we live. Have we seen worship as a "spiritual" activity, which is strictly separate from material concerns?
- Does our worship form us into people who love and care for the poor, or does it merely express our feelings and emotions?
- Which is more important for us to consider, national political reform or congregational liturgical reform?

3. Chosen nations.

- Amos has a message of judgment to the house of Israel: "Your social order is transient. It will not last, but God's justice is eternal." This was hard to imagine for a people told they were "chosen," and it is also hard to hear in a country which has been taught that our style of democracy is the hope of all humankind.⁹ Is it possible that our social order is good but not eternal; or even flawed and in need of correction; or, dare we say, unjust and bound for destruction?
- Do teachings about the special role of our country in the world make it harder to hear a passage like this?

4. Prosperity.

- Amos challenges any gospel that promises prosperity. He also addresses glib assumptions that the day of the Lord will mean good news for those who experience privilege in this world. In what ways is the “gospel of prosperity” promoted in our culture?
- Amos calls us to beware: unjust social orders will not stand in the day of judgment. When we talk about “last things” in worship, is the judgment of social inequities part of the picture we draw?

The Missional Merger

Note: Poverty is a divisive issue as you may have discovered already in leading this study. One source of bitter divisiveness is the question of a proper government role in addressing poverty. Although this is enormously important, that question could distract us from the purposes of this study. It could distract us by dividing participants into political corners, creating a battleground of the culture war out of the classroom. Second, the question could allow digression into arguments about legislative policy as a way to avoid imagining faithful responses to poverty. You will need to take care not to allow these distractions to enter your session. This includes being careful not to let the discussion deteriorate into predictable “liberal versus conservative” patterns. If this happens, you might want to stop the discussion and name that phenomenon. It may be that your group needs to discuss that issue. Ask the class: “Why is it that it is getting harder for the church to discuss issues that matter without falling into these same two divisions?” It might be helpful to note that the powers that profit from poverty have an interest in God’s people not being able to speak to one another. It may be that the first thing we need to do is address whether we have been so formed by the so-called culture wars that we are unable to pay attention to important matters in a faithful way.

Begin by reviewing with the group the big issues about justice that Amos confronts us with. These are: 1. Are the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer? 2. Does our worship form us into a people capable of seeing, loving, and caring for the poor? and 3. Do we celebrate the rich and shame the poor or do we truly yearn for the reign of God, in which poor are celebrated and injustice is a scandal? Then using Participants’ Piece # 3 “Responding to Amos,” divide up into groups with assigned questions or discuss select questions with the large group.

Commissioning

Place an empty chalice and communion plate in the center of the group. Begin in quiet reflection. Ask participants to consider the emptiness of that plate and cup, and pray that it would be full with enough bread to share. Encourage prayer also for your worship, that in offering yourselves to God you would become like the One you love and adore.

After an appropriate silence (30 seconds), share in “God’s Desire: a litany,” Participants’ Piece # 4.

1. Bill McKibben, “The Christian Paradox: How a Faithful Nation gets Jesus Wrong,” *Harpers*, Vol. 311, No. 1863, August 2005, 31.
2. This is the argument of David Matzko McCarthy in *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), 108–13
3. J. D. Smart, “Amos,” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 118.

4. Gene M. Tucker, "Amos: Introduction," *Harper-Collins Study Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 1356.
5. Shelley, 746
6. *Ibid.*, 750.
7. *Ibid.*, 750.
8. David Hilfiker, *Urban Injustice: How Ghettoes Happen* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2002), 35.
9. "The ideal of America is the hope of all mankind. . . . That hope still lights the way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it." George W. Bush, "President's Remarks to the Nation," 11 September 11 2002 (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020911-3.html>).

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Lesson by Stan Wilson, pastor of Northside Baptist Church, Clinton, Mississippi.

Participants' Pieces

1. The Bible and Work

- When we are discussing the poor, we will need to take into account the strong notions of shame that are associated in U.S. American culture with being unable to produce, keep up, or keep busy. To be poor will always mean to live in desperate need, but in our culture it will also mean to live in shame and disgrace because the poor are often cast as a “drain on our resources.” Often seen as those who cannot produce, we tend to look away from such people in our culture. We recoil from that which we define as shameful.
- While the Bible commends work and critiques idleness, good work is that which contributes to a common good; it is not good when it is pursued for private gain. For example, Proverbs says that “one who is slack in work is close kin to a vandal” (18:9) but then almost immediately warns that the rich are in danger of destructive pride (18:11–12). (See also the warning against self-indulgence in verse 1.) In this context the rich are the biggest threat to our common life because of their private search for individual happiness. In this vision the idle are more a nuisance than a threat.
- In the New Testament Paul speaks clearly that all members of a Christian community have obligations to provide for the common good (see Ephesians 4:28). Thieves are urged to quit stealing and get to work, but notice that the purpose of their work is not so they will quit being a drain on the community but that they also can make contributions to the needy. In other words the common good is directed toward care for the poor. Work is valuable if it contributes to our common good, which is directed to love and care for the vulnerable. Work is not valuable in and of itself.
- From a biblical perspective there is no shame in poverty, and neither is work celebrated if it leads to mere personal wealth. From a biblical perspective it is disgraceful to ignore or exploit the poor, but it is not disgraceful to be poor.² Jesus also makes claims about the blessedness of poverty that are likely astonishing to our (U.S. American) ears (Luke 6:20).

Today we will not try to unravel the perplexing, unsettling differences between the American dream and the biblical vision; rather, we will take a more modest course. Today let us ask simply whether we have been formed more deeply by a biblical vision of blessedness or a modern American vision of private happiness and success. Today Amos will want to know whether our worship forms us into people who can see and love the poor or only serves to disconnect us from the poor. We will be asking what we desire, what we celebrate, and what we earnestly seek.

2. Psalm 40 Responsive Reading

Leader: I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

People: He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

Leader: He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God,

All: Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD (Ps. 40:1–3).

(Silent meditation, 10–15 seconds)

Leader: Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear.

Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

People: Then I said, “Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me.

All: “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (Ps. 40:6–8).

(Silent meditation, 10–15 seconds)

Leader: Be pleased, O LORD, to deliver me; O LORD, make haste to help me.

People: Let all those be put to shame and confusion who seek to snatch away my life; let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt.

Leader: Let those be appalled because of their shame, who say to me, “Aha, Aha!”

People: But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation say continually, “Great is the LORD!”

Leader: As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me.

All: You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God (Ps. 40:13-17)

3. What is shameful? What is celebrated?

Instructions: As a means of exploring and perhaps exposing our own cultural values, go through the following list and assign values to each word based on your own immediate impression of it. In the company that you ordinarily keep, do these words invoke shame or celebration? Assign a value, from 0 to 10 as follows:

- 0–2 Shameful
- 3–4 Negative
- 5 Neutral
- 6–7 Positive
- 8–10 Celebrated

welfare queen
insider trader
go-getter
prosperous
profit
workaholic

poor
looter
indigent
dependent
handout
tycoon

wealthy
billionaire
beggar
gambling debt
dead-beat dad
windfall

3. Responding to Amos

1. Charitable Giving.

Within ten days of hurricane Katrina, donors had given over \$600 million to relief, and studies show that charitable giving is rising steadily (from \$231 billion in 2001 to \$249 billion in 2004). A closer look at these numbers suggests that we are far more generous to those we perceive as innocent victims than to those whom we think are responsible for their own condition. For example, gifts to legal services, food pantries, and rehabilitation for ex-convicts has declined in each of those years (from \$22.1 billion in 2001 to \$19.2

billion in 2004). [“Donors Favor Those ‘Worthy’ of Compassion,” *The Christian Century*, Vol. 122, No. 20, 4 October 2005, 12–13.]

Question: What do we say about ourselves when we discriminate between those worthy of compassion and those unworthy?

2. Where Your Treasure Is.

According to evangelical scholar Ronald Sider, studies suggest that the wealthier Christians become, the less we give in proportion to our incomes. Since 1968 the average income of Christians has steadily increased, and yet the percentage we give to the church has decreased.

- In 1968 the average church member gave 3.1 percent of their income to their church.
- In 1990 the average church member gave 2.66 percent of their income.
- In 1968 evangelical denominations averaged yearly contributions at 6.15 percent of income and mainline churches averaged 3.11 percent.
- In 2002 evangelicals averaged yearly contributions at 4.27 percent while mainline churches averaged 3.17 percent. [Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005), 20–21.]

Questions: While Bible is clear that God has a special concern for the poor, what do you think accounts for evidence that the wealthier we become, the less we give? Do these figures indicate that Christians are shaped more by a biblical vision or by the American dream?

Discussion: Estimate the percentage of your church’s yearly receipts that go toward care of the poor. How would you determine a faithful figure?

3. Christians on Race.

Any discussion of poverty in America is incomplete until it has addressed race, but this is another divisive issue.

- According to Ron Sider, “In 1989 George Gallup Jr. and James Castelli published the results of a survey to determine which groups in the United States were least and most likely to object to having black neighbors . . . Catholics and non-evangelical Christians ranked least likely to object to black neighbors; 11 percent objected. Mainline Protestants came next at 16 percent. At 17 percent, Baptists and evangelicals were among the most likely groups to object to black neighbors, and 20 percent of Southern Baptists objected to black neighbors.” [Sider, 24–25.]
- According to the authors of *United by Faith* (Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, Geroge Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim), there are approximately 230,000 Christian congregations in the United States. Only 5.5 percent of those are multiracial, defined as “a congregation in which no one racial group accounts for 80 percent or more of the membership.” [“All Churches Should Be Multiracial,” *Christianity Today*, April 2005 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/004/22.33.html>).]

Questions: Do Christians do more to eradicate racism or do we do more to perpetuate it in our culture? Is diversity part of the vision of your church?

4. God's Desire: a litany (adapted from Matt. 5:6; Mic. 6:8; and Matt. 9:13).

Leader: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

People: For they will be filled.

Leader: What does the Lord require of you?

People: To do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.

Leader: Go and learn what this means,

People: "I desire mercy and not sacrifice."

Leader: What does God desire, and for what do we hope?

People: Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

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