

⁶Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire; it will devour them, and Bethel will have no one to quench it. ⁷There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground....¹⁰There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. ¹¹You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. ¹²For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. ¹³Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil. ¹⁴Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. ¹⁵Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

A fascinating part of travel is not only seeing different sights, but also the different attitudes of people in different places. It doesn't matter if it's a different state or a different country. There are also some things that people have in common. One of those goals is seeking a better life. It's why we love technology. It's why we tell children to get an education. It's why people move – to make our lives better.

That was also an Israelite goal. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had become pretty wealthy. They had sought a better life. As good as that sounds, the Lord found some problems with that goal. It's why he sent the prophet Amos to speak to them.

1. Self-seeking will be disciplined. (verses 6-7, 10-13)

⁶Seek the LORD and live, or he will sweep through the tribes of Joseph like a fire; it will devour them, and Bethel will have no one to quench it. ⁷There are those who turn justice into bitterness and cast righteousness to the ground....¹⁰There are those who hate the one who upholds justice in court and detest the one who tells the truth. ¹¹You levy a straw tax on the poor and impose a tax on their grain. Therefore, though you have built stone mansions, you will not live in them; though you have planted lush vineyards, you will not drink their wine. ¹²For I know how many are your offenses and how great your sins. There are those who oppress the innocent and take bribes and deprive the poor of justice in the courts. ¹³Therefore the prudent keep quiet in such times, for the times are evil.

It was not a bad thing for the people of Amos' time to seek better lives for themselves and their children. They pursued it aggressively and they were pretty successful at accomplishing that goal. They were so successful that seeking a better life became a national standard. All of that sounds good, but there was a dark side to it. In seeking a better life, they became very self-centered. Everyone was so 'out for themselves' that there was no justice in the courts. There was no respect for truth. Bribery was rampant. The wealthy preyed on the poor.

The problem was not just rich people. It was true of the entire nation. You could see that in a city called Bethel. Many years before Jacob had had to flee from the anger of his brother Esau. He laid down to sleep with nothing more than a rock on which to lay his head. That night he dreamed about angels ascending and descending from heaven. So, he called it, “the house of God, Bethel.” Bethel was still a place of worship in Amos’ day, but the worship of the Lord had been replaced with worship that served people.

It was the same problem the young man in the gospel lesson had. He thought he was right but in his heart he was selfish.

And that’s the nature of selfishness. It prevents us from wanting anything but what benefits ourselves. Selfishness, self-centeredness is the way we come into this world. It’s our natural motivation.

The only way people won’t be selfish is if they have some motivation not to be selfish. The people of Amos time were going to learn the first of those motivations – force. If you have ever watched two children playing with blocks, you know what happens. Eventually you have to tell one or the other...you need to share.

The other motivation is love. When a parent does what they do for their children, from changing dirty diapers to providing Christian education, it’s all about love.

So what happens when people don’t love anyone but themselves? What happens when God sets a lifestyle standard that goes against what you want or like? What happens when there is less love for God and his Word than there is for ourselves and what we want to do? Then God promises to take your block away!

2. Seek good and live forever. (verses 14-15)

¹⁴Seek good, not evil, that you may live. Then the LORD God Almighty will be with you, just as you say he is. ¹⁵Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts. Perhaps the LORD God Almighty will have mercy on the remnant of Joseph. So what does God mean when he encourages us to seek good?

There is only one way that seeking good will be pleasing to God. You can see it in our second reading where we see a faithfulness in Jesus that surpasses anything we will ever know. Why was he so faithful? Because he loved his Father and because he loved you and me. His selflessness made up for our selfishness.

That is the key for us, too, to love our Father in heaven. The difficulty with that love is that it is like a long-distance romance. If you don’t work at it and keep it up, it fades and disappears. And that is always replaced by selfishness.

If you haven’t worked at it or kept up your love for God there is a solution. It’s called “repentance.” When we see our selfishness and the way we have been lukewarm to our God, we repent and turn away from those sins.

Our Savior Jesus has never turned away from us. The love we have and need never wavers in him. Jesus has and will do all to prove that love for us whether it be in the way he provides for us through the bounty of the earth, or the open ears to hear our troubles, or just the shoulder to cry on when we are filled with sorrow or remorse. God’s love is always there to turn us away from loving ourselves to loving him and each other.

We will constantly fight this battle. But the Lord always holds out hope to us. It is his desire that we live with him forever in heaven. That is the better life he wants us to seek. Amen.