

Using and Loving
Amos 8:4-7
September 18, 2022
First Presbyterian, Luling

I imagine many of you have seen this quote before; in fact, I think Fred B has mentioned it to me a couple of times. It goes something like “To love fully, we must learn to use things and love people and not love things and use people.” That one is attributed to someone named John Powell, but there is an earlier quote attributed to early Latter Day Saints leader Spencer Kimball that is more concise, and easier to remember: “Love people, not things. Use things, not people.” The sentiment is the same: People are meant to be loved and things meant to be used. And we mess up when we get those two mixed up.

The prophet Amos might well have said something similar. Love people, not things. Use things, not people. Amos was prophesying during a time of peace and prosperity. Well, prosperity for some people, but not all. The rich have gotten prosperous, in part, by taking advantage of the poor, by dishonest means. Amos doesn't hold back:

You who trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor of the land. Despite the peace and prosperity, all is not well in Israel, and Amos is not going to be silent. This is his calling as a prophet, what God has given him to say to the people.

What is it, exactly, that the rich are doing to exploit the poor? Well, they're rushing the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for resting, not just because it was commanded, but because of justice. The Sabbath laws specifically said that it was for rest not just for the wealthy, but for those who were servants and aliens, even for the animals. Nobody was supposed to work, as a matter of fairness and justice. You'll remember the struggle in our own culture when we said everything was going into “lockdown” for the pandemic. That allowed some people to stay at home, but there were plenty of people,

“essential workers” we called them, who still had to work. The safety of lockdown was not for them. Sabbath, though, was for everyone. And the rich were trying to rush the Sabbath to be over, so they could get back to making money for themselves. They could rest anytime they wanted to.

They were also cheating in their sales practices. Amos says they were “making the ephah small and the shekel great.” The ephah was a way to measure grain, so picture a bushel basket weighing grain. They were making those baskets smaller, just a shade, than they were supposed to, so that the person paying for the grain was not getting the amount they paid for. And the shekel great—the shekel is the money weight, so they were making it seem like they were paying more money than they actually were when they bought grain from the farmers. In short, it was a way for business people to take advantage of both those who were providing the grain, and those who needed to buy it. If I were to think of an analogy, it might be something like payday lenders, who lend money at interest rates that no one can pay back, but they’re the only option for some people.

The third accusation Amos brings is that they are selling the sweepings of the wheat. There are two problems with this. One is that it means they’re combining the grain of the wheat with the stems, which aren’t good for much except bedding for animals. The other is that the law specifically prohibits it, requiring land owners to leave the edges of the field and the sweepings of the wheat for those who are the poorest of the poor to come and harvest.

Amos is not saying that doing business or making money is bad. He is saying that taking advantage of those who are most vulnerable is bad. Really bad. Against the law, in both letter and spirit. He’s saying that using people, especially poor people, in order to love things, namely money, is unjust. And the Lord will never forget any of these deeds, which is a chilling warning.

It’s easy to point the finger at these people, using people and loving things. It’s harder for us, to be clear about our own motivations.

Are we using people to love things? Or are we using things to love people?

Here's an example, that's outside the realm of buying and selling and business. Teachers of young children do this frequently. If Bill is causing a ruckus, for instance, teachers rarely will tell Bill to sit down and hush, because that's giving Bill attention for his negative behavior, which is presumably just what Bill wants: attention. Instead, teachers will do this: "Oh, I like how Beth is sitting quietly and is ready to learn." Is the teacher purely loving Beth and her behavior? Well, not entirely. The teacher is praising Beth, that part is true. But the teacher is also using Beth in order to teach Bill a lesson. Our motives are sometimes all scrambled up, and we end up using people for an outcome we think is good.

It is very easy to slip into using people for our own means. It is very easy to treat people, especially people who don't enjoy the same privileges or status that we do, as means to an end. It is very easy to fail to love as we are called to love.

A couple of times in just the past month, I've been at convenience stores, different ones, and had this very same encounter: the clerk says "Hi, how are you?" And I mumble, "Fine, thanks. How are you?" And then the clerk says "I'm good. Thanks for asking," as if they were surprised to be treated like a real person, rather than little more than a change machine. And I wondered, a little bit shocked, how often I've failed to respond to someone with that basic kindness, how often I've used someone to give me my \$2.86 in change without even making eye contact.

We must learn to use things and to love God and our neighbor, not to love things and use our neighbor. It's that simple. And that difficult. Difficult when we attempt to tease apart our motivations for using and loving. Use things. Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself. May we have the strength and the courage to follow these commandments.

