



FOR THREE SINS...AND FOR FOUR

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Welcome and in the words of the Apostle Paul to the ancient Roman Christians, “the churches of Christ greet you.” I’m thankful to be in your home or wherever you are right now to spend a few moments together in the Word of God. Our study today will come from one of the Minor Prophets of the Old Testament: Amos. We call them the minor prophets only because of the length of their prophecies not because of their scope or impact. In fact, some of the weightiest and most convicting messages to the people of God in the Old Testament came from the lips of the minor prophets and Amos is perhaps the most powerful of all of them.

Amos was not a prophet by trade. He didn’t attend a prophets’ school or dedicate his time fully to the ministry of the word of God. He was a shepherd from Tekoa who God sent on a special mission to prophesy to His sinful people, Israel. The short book we have containing his prophecies is one of the most pointed and fiery of all the bible. It was he who warned the people to ‘prepare to meet their God in battle’ because they had provoked Him through their sin. He foretold of a famine that would strike the land, not of bread or of water, but of hearing the word of the Lord. That is, when they would finally go seeking after a word from God, God would no longer be speaking to them.

As his prophecy unfolds, he gained their attention by strongly condemning the surrounding pagan nations and then, Judah, God’s kingdom people just to their south. This was fine with them, but Amos didn’t stop there. He simply used that as a platform from which to condemn their own wickedness. Amos uses a strange phrase several times that I want to talk with you about today. I’ll read from Amos 2:4. It reads: “Thus says the LORD: “For three transgressions of Judah, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, Because they have despised the law of the LORD, And have not kept His commandments. Their lies lead them astray, Lies which their fathers followed.” Why does God mean when He says: “for three transgressions and for four” He will punish the people? He not only uses that expression in reference to the sins of Judah but those of several other nations as well, including Israel. It’s an expression that we would do well to understand and take note of today.

The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century B.C. around the same time as Hosea. Jeroboam, the second, was reigning in the northern kingdom of Israel at that time and though the nation was rich and at peace at this time, they were spiritually bankrupt and at war with God because of their sins. Amos lived in the southern kingdom of Judah. He lived in the little village of Tekoa, a few miles south of Jerusalem. He was a farmer. He raised sheep and tended to sycamore trees. In other words, he wasn't a preacher by trade, but God had a special mission for him, nonetheless. He chose Amos to go up to the northern kingdom and deliver a stern message for Him – a message of judgment and coming destruction. And so, Amos left his sheep and his trees behind and journeyed up to the city of Bethel. Amaziah was the High Priest and Amos went to warn Him and the people of what God was going to do.

His sermon was really a masterpiece. He won the attention of a hostile audience by first launching into a series of prophetic attacks on their enemies from other nations. He describes these messages from God as God roaring from Jerusalem. Well, all of that was met with their enthusiastic approval. They were glad to hear someone condemn the pagan people around them and Amos did not hold back in doing so. He started with Damascus saying in Amos 1:3 "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they have threshed Gilead with implements of iron." This likely refers to a brutal act that they had committed during war where they lined their prisoners on the ground and took a threshing instrument – which was a heavy platform of boards with sharp stones and iron points on the bottom – and drove it over the prisoners. God took note of that atrocity and vowed to execute judgment on them for doing it.

He then passes judgment on the Philistines who were guilty of slave trade. Verses 6 and 7: "Thus says the Lord: for three transgressions of Gaza, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, because they took captive the whole captivity to deliver them up to Edom. But I will send a fire upon the wall of Gaza which shall devour its palaces."

He then in verses 9 and 10 pronounces a similar fate upon the city of Tyre and the Phoenicians for much the same reason. He judges Edom in verses 11 and 12 for relentlessly pursuing Israel with the sword. Then, he aims at the Ammonites in verses 13 thru 15 for the awful acts of ripping open the wombs of mothers in Gilead in an effort to wipe out the male population. God was very indignant over what they had done and vowed to punish them severely. Then he turns to Moab because they had shown no respect to the king of Edom when they opened his grave and burned his bones to lime.

Now, there's an important thing to take note of in all of this so far and that is that ALL people of ALL nations are accountable to God for their behavior. These nations didn't have the same relationship with God as His chosen people had and they didn't have the same revelations from God as Israel had received but that didn't matter. They had a moral law to abide by that they were guilty of flagrantly breaking. These nations were living in rebellion to God by ignoring even the basic standard of right and wrong that every human being is subject to. Even today, God deals with His covenant people, the church, in a unique way but that doesn't mean that He is not keenly aware and involved in what goes on the nations of men and in the lives of people all over this world. God sees and takes note of the evils and injustices and the travesties that are committed around the globe, and He promises to repay them with His judgment. The world is treasuring up God's wrath today but flippantly shutting God out and refusing to submit to His Son in gospel obedience. The bible says that one day Christ will return with His mighty angels in flaming fire taking vengeance on them who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel and that they will be punished with everlasting destruction... (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

So, Amos promises that God's judgment will soon rain down on these wicked nations surrounding Israel. But then, he gets a little closer to home. He sets in on the southern kingdom of Judah. He begins tightening the noose a little. He accuses Judah of ignoring God's word. They didn't keep God's commandments and statutes and instead, did what they wanted to do. This led them to idolatry which has always been the height of insult against God. They may have possessed the word of God, but they didn't pay any attention to it, and he says that God would send the fire of His wrath down on Judah and destroy the palaces of Jerusalem.

Amos might have gotten away with his preaching had he stopped there. As long as you're condemning everyone else, that's one thing. But that's not why Amos came to Bethel. He was there to condemn THEIR sins and he goes right down the list. In chapter 2, he condemns them for covetousness, for rank immorality such as sexual sin, for exploiting and taking from the poor even in the name of their religion, and for their hypocrisy: making a mockery of worship and of God. Israel was ripe for destruction and Amos was there to let them know it. He essentially says in chapter 4:12 that since they had refused to repent even as God had repeatedly warned them and given them opportunity to turn back to Him, that they had declared war against God, and they should prepare for a conflict they were not prepared to win. Nobody wins when they wage war against the God of heaven.

But I want you to notice the phrase that occurs eight times in the first two chapters of this book. As Amos goes down the list and pronounces judgment upon each city and nation, he says "For three transgressions...and for four." Amos 1:3 says: "Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment..." Verse 6: "Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Gaza" and for four, I will not turn away its punishment..." Verse 9: "Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Tyre, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment." The exact same expression is used in verse 11 about Edom; in verse 13 about Ammon; in chapter 2, verse 1 about Moab; and then in verse 4 he applies it to Judah; all building up to Amos 2:6 which declares: "Thus says the Lord: "For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not turn away its punishment, Because they sell the righteous for silver, And the poor for a pair of sandals."

What does he mean by this expression? Is he referring to four specific sins that God was holding against them? Was he referring to three sins plus four more? No, because in each case, he lists their sins and there is no consistent number of sins mentioned. Rather, he's using a rhetorical formula that they would well understand and that we would do well to understand today, as well. Some call it the X plus one formula and it was familiar to the ancient Jews. Like the use of many other numbers in prophecy, it is not a literal figure but a symbolic and rhetorical device. It appears several times in the book of Proverbs. For example, in Proverbs 30:15 "...There are three things that are never satisfied, Four never say, "Enough!" Without going into the meaning of the Proverb itself, the saying within it was merely used as an idiom to indicate a cumulative effect. In other words, the expression means that something has reached its limit. It is now full and complete.

This was God's warning of doom to the ancient people of Israel and these seven other wicked nations: that God's patience had run out and that they had stubbornly and arrogantly persisted in their sin with no repentance. And so now, there was no turning back: God's judgment would soon come. This is a warning that is thundered in several places in the Bible, and it echoes down through time to those of us today who refuse to repent and turn from our sin. The bible teaches us that God's patience and mercy has a limit. There is a line which one can cross where there is no turning back. There is a spiritual deadline for every person and all peoples. There comes a time when one manifests such a hard heart toward God and about his or her sin that time runs out and the door of mercy is closed.

After Amos pronounces punishment upon the people, he reminds them that their judgment did not come without warning – and many warnings at that. Five times in chapter 4, Amos repeats the phrase: “Yet you have not returned to Me,” says the Lord.” He reminds them – that God had sent famine; He took away their bread “Yet you have not returned to Me.” (verse 6) He also sent drought and caused them to wander from city to city looking for water and they could not find enough. Verse 8: “Yet you have not returned to Me.” He destroyed their crops through blight and by pestilence. “Yet”, verse 9 declares, “you have not returned to Me, says the Lord.” And then He says that He brought war and caused their young men to die by the sword. Still, he says “you have not returned to Me.” And still yet, He sent natural disasters such as earthquakes which destroyed their cities in the fashion of ancient Sodom and Gomorrah but even all of this had not driven them to repentance. Well, what else was God to do? How else was God to get their attention? And now, in yet one more overture of divine love and mercy, God sends them Amos, to warn them and plead with them to repent. If they did not, a terrible disaster would fall upon them.

Friend, God’s patience and mercy are much longer than yours and mine, believe it or not. God has striven with man for millennia and he gives every one of us more chances and more opportunities to repent of our sins and turn to Him than any of us deserve. We all deserve judgment for our sins, but God has stayed His hand for a time and gives us multiplied opportunities to turn from our sins. But eventually, time runs out; God gives up; mercy’s door is shut. Proverbs 29:1 says, “He who is often rebuked, and hardens his neck, Will suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.” It’s a dangerous thing to try the patience of God and people are doing it every day. We’re warned in 2 Peter 3:9-11, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness.”

You see, God’s patience has tarried a long time, but time is running short. How long has God been waiting on you? How long has God been showering you with blessings and allowing you to live your life as you see fit without meeting His judgment? Do you just assume that since you’ve gotten away with it until now, that God’s judgment will never come? Do you have the idea that God is so infinitely merciful that He will just let it go and forgive and forget with no change and no repentance on your part? If so, you’re under a delusion. The Day of the Lord is coming. God is keeping a record. Unrepented of sin will not pass before God’s judgment bar. We must NOT press God’s patience to its limit. How do you look at sin? What are you doing about your sin? Are you tempting God?

Friend, I want you to see that the sins that Amos condemned were not sins that were so great God could not forgive them. He isn’t saying that some sins are not a very big deal and others rise to another level. And he is not saying that they had exceeded some set number of sins that God would tolerate, as though some sin is okay. All sin is serious, and ALL sin requites the judgment of God. What Amos is saying is that their repeated refusal to repent of their sins meant that God’s patience had run out. It’s not a matter of how great your sins are or how small you think they may be. The question is, what are you doing about your sin no matter what it may be? Refusing to repent of any sin is a deadly proposition in the eyes of God. Knowingly holding onto ANY sin is stubborn rebellion against God and God won’t put up with that.

You may think “my sins are not as bad as someone else’s” but they are if you refuse to repent of them. God will forgive the murderer who repents before He’ll forgive the gossip or the tax cheat who refuses to repent. God will forgive the adulterer who humbly comes to Him in obedience to His word and turns away from his or sin before He’ll forgive the seemingly smallest sin that one refuses to let go of and stubbornly holds onto it.

The apostle John says there is a sin not unto death and then there is a sin unto death (1 John 5:16). If you look at what John is talking about in that first epistle, the sin unto death is simply a sin that one refuses to confess and repent of. So, I ask today, what is the state of your life and your soul? Will God say to you “For three sins, and for four, I will not turn away your punishment” because despite His warnings; despite His patience; despite His forbearance; you have refused to repent?

Amos said the people could repent and turn to God, but the time was quickly approaching when they could no longer repent, and judgment day would come. Is that day getting closer for you? As Amos said: “Prepare to meet your God.” We will meet Him in judgment and if we have not repented of our sins and submitted to Him in gospel obedience, we’ll face His eternal wrath. Think about that, friend, and turn away from your sin and obey the Christ and be saved.

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