

Proper 23

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Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, source of every blessing, your generous goodness comes to us anew every day. By the work of your Spirit lead us to acknowledge your goodness, give thanks for your benefits, and serve you in willing obedience; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15

{6} Seek the LORD and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. {7} Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!... {10} They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. {11} Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. {12} For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate. {13} Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time. {14} Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. {15} Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

6. *Seek the Lord and live*: The prophet repeats Yahweh's exhortation in 5:4, "Seek me and live." While there is no guarantee that Yahweh will be merciful if the people seek him, it is certain that if they do not he will "break out against the house of Joseph like fire" (see the note on verse 15).

the house of Joseph...Bethel: References to the northern kingdom and its sanctuary. If the people do not return to Yahweh he will certainly destroy them. Still, there may be another alternative.

7. *justice...righteousness*: These are terms that describe the nature of relationships that exist between people who are bound together in covenant with Yahweh and each other. The people have perverted them, and are being called on to return to Yahweh and their covenant duties.

[8-9: A hymnic fragment which extols Yahweh's power over the nature order.]

11-12: A series of accusations against the wealthy members of the community who steal from the poor. But Amos is clearly not "prudent;" he speaks out against injustice.

the gate: A metaphor for judgment because that was carried out in the gates of the village. The rich hate those who would indict them; they even physically assault those who would bring a case against them.

13. *the prudent will keep silent*: The wise person keeps silent knowing that it would only lead to further trouble. Yahweh will judge those who pervert justice. The word for "the prudent one" in Hebrew is *maskil*. In the Psalms the word connotes a type of hymn (Psalms 32:1; 42:1; 44:1; 45:1; 47:8. So some interpret it to mean at an evil time such Psalms would not be sung. Shalom Paul proposes still another translation: "Therefore, at such a time the prudent one moans, For it is a time of misfortune." [1]

14-15: Again they people of the northern kingdom are urged to change their ways, to renounce evil and love the good and restore justice in the place of judgment.

It may be that the Lord...will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph: "The operative and

decisive word here is [*ulay*] ('perhaps'). Repentance in and of itself is a sine qua non, but it does not operate absolutely or automatically. It cannot be resorted to as a magical device or opted for as a guarantee to change the will of God. Complete certainty of its acceptance or rejection is never really known, for the final decision is always reserved for God alone. '... Repentance and atonement by humans are indeed an irrevocable presupposition for divine forgiveness, but they cannot by these means coerce him. It depends entirely upon Yahweh whether he will show mercy or not.)' [2]

Psalm 90:12-17

{12} So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart. {13} Turn, O LORD! How long? Have compassion on your servants! {14} Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days. {15} Make us glad as many days as you have afflicted us, and as many years as we have seen evil. {16} Let your work be manifest to your servants, and your glorious power to their children. {17} Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands-- O prosper the work of our hands!

The Psalm is a communal lament which bewails the harshness of life which ends in a return to the dust.

12: The Psalmist urges the congregation to seek to learn wisdom from Yahweh.

14. Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love: Yahweh's intervention in the afflictions of the people is the morning of a new day. "Through an oracle of salvation Yahweh would grant a [*hesed*], a bestowal of gracious affection for Israel." *Hesed*, "steadfast love" is one of the covenant terms, describing Yahweh's consistent care and concern for his people." [3]

15. as many years as we have seen evil: The suffering of the people has been of long duration. "...the situation that underlies Psalm 90 is not identified in detail.... We hear only that a heavy burden oppresses the people (v. 13), that for years nothing but distress has been seen (v. 15), and that the work of human beings is hopelessly at a standstill (v. 17)." [4]

Hebrews 4:12-16

{12} Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. {13} And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account. {14} Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. {15} For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. {16} Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

12-13: "This is...an elaborate bit of festive prose" [5] concerning the power of God's word and his ability to see even what is hidden. God's word, like God, is alive, and can divide soul and spirit, and judge thoughts and intentions.

the heart: The seat of reason and intention in the first century view.

14-15: we have a great high priest...*Jesus, the Son of God...in every respect tested as we are...without sin:* Jesus is our high priest, yet he is greater than any other high priest. He is the Son of God and he has been tested as we are, so he can understand our frailties and failings.

16. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace: An exhortation to come to God who is merciful and gracious even toward those who are not without sin.

Mark 10:17-31

{17} As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" {18} Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. {19} You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not

commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." {20} He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." {21} Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." {22} When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions. {23} Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" {24} And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! {25} It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." {26} They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" {27} Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible." {28} Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." {29} Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, {30} who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age--houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions--and in the age to come eternal life. {31} But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

The whole Marcan reading is paralleled in Matthew 19:16-30; verses 17-22, in Luke 18:18-25.

17. he was setting out on a journey: The purpose of the journey is developed in verse 32; "They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem...."

a man: Mathew says he was a young man (19:20); Luke identifies him as a "ruler" (18:18). Mark says simply, "a man," and later indicates that he had many possessions (verse 22).

Good Teacher: "In a limited good society, compliments indicate aggression; they implicitly accuse a person of rising above the rest of one's fellows at their expense. Compliments conceal envy, not unlike the evil eye. Jesus must fend off the aggressive accusation by denying any special quality of the sort that might give offense to others.... Here the counter question serves to ward off the unwitting challenge, while the proverb "No one is good but God alone" (v. 18) wards off the envy." [6]

19: The commandments that are those that deal with human relationships.

you shall not defraud: This may be a form of the commandment against stealing, or a reference to the commandments against coveting. [7] Both Matthew nor Luke omit it.

Matthew adds, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 19:19), a reference to Jesus' use of the ... from Leviticus 19:18 in Matthew 22:39.

21. Jesus...loved him: Only Mark includes this note. "Jesus loves the rich young ruler with the love of God which summons men to the very highest." [8]

sell what you own and give the money to the poor: "This is contrary to rabbinic teaching, which states that a man should not give away more than one fifth of his possessions during his lifetime lest he become a public charge. It is true, however, that there were those who, in a gesture of unusual charity, gave away all they had." [9] In our society this advice seems extreme. We have government institutions and programs to care for the needs of the poor. Individuals do not ordinarily interact directly with the poor. They pay their taxes and give to the church and to other charities which in turn provide for the needs of the poor. But in Jesus' day there were not such agencies to maintain a distance between the well-to-do and the destitute. Those who were well off were blessed by God for the very purpose of benefiting the poor. They rarely did so, and as a consequence were thieves.

22. he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions: The man considers his wealth to be for his pleasure, and so he is shocked by the suggestion that he should use it for the needs of others.

23-24: Jesus reflects on the difficulty of the rich entering heaven, when they will not use their wealth for the reason it was given to them.

25. a camel...the eye of a needle: "The camel is the largest animal in the Middle East, and the eye of a needle the smallest opening. Eloquence, a male virtue in antiquity, involved the

skill of verbal exaggeration or hyperbole, which Jesus uses here with telling effect."

26. *They were greatly astounded*: They were surprised to learn that the rich do not have an inside track for divine patronage. [10]

27. *For God all things are possible*: A popular proverb.

28: Peter takes the opportunity to explore the possible rewards for giving up everything to follow Jesus.

29-30: "With a word of honor [Truly I tell you] (v. 29) Jesus insists that those who leave family and lands to become his followers, or 'for the sake of the good news,' will truly become accepted members of the family of God the patron-father. They will receive a hundredfold 'now in this age,' including full participation in the 'age to come,' that is, participation in the new society, the new family of the Patron God." [11]

31. *many who are first will be last, and the last will be first*: Parallel in Matthew 19:30. See also Mark 9:35; Luke 13:20 and Matthew 20:16 for other uses of the maxim. "Compared with the present status of the greedy rich, the status of those who follow Jesus marks a reversal of rank, as the proverb in v. 31 indicates. Putting the first last and the last first describes the public honoring and shaming of those whose places were changed. Such behavior would be guaranteed to cause violence, since it is outrageous. In an honor-shame culture those who are socially first are considered to belong where they are and this by God's will. The same is true of those who are last." [12] Among Christians those places are reversed.

Reflection

What must I do to inherit eternal life? If the question were can I inherit eternal life by what I do, we would quickly answer, no. But the question James asked still echoes in our ears. If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Have a nice day," and yet *you* do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?

In the lesson from Amos we find ourselves indicted for cheating and oppressing the needy. Most of the time we do not do that by deliberately conniving to defraud them. But, to the extent that we do not strive to protect them and provide for them, we are guilty of defrauding them. How? Why? Because nothing that we have is ours! It all belongs to God. We are only the custodians and stewards of whatever passes through our hands. If we use it for our comfort and pleasure, and others suffer because of our selfishness, then we will be judged to be wicked slaves, unworthy of the continued favor of God.

Wealth and the love of wealth is a danger to our relationship with God. If a hand or foot or eye should be sacrificed for the sake of eternal life, how much more willingly we should sacrifice the wealth God has trusted us with to be used for his purposes. When we seek to be recognized for who we are and what we have we are in danger of losing everything. Only when we willingly give up everything we have gotten for ourselves will we be able to receive the benefits God has for us.

Hymns [13]

With One Voice (e.g. 762v), *Hymnal Supplement* 1991 (e.g. 725s) and *LBW* (e.g. 32).

E=Entrance; D=Hymn of the Day; I=First Lesson, P=Psalm; II=Second Lesson; G=Gospel

776s --E--Word of God, (716v)

455 --D--"Come, Follow Me,"

720v --P--In the Presence

232 --II--Your Word, O

168 --II--Kyrie, God Father

739v --II--In All Our Grief

482 --G--When I Survey

344 --G--We Sing the

448, 460, 158, 395

Prayers of the People [14]

O God of time and mystery; we know the feeling of Job when his senses said you were absent. We have felt that absence too. But we also know that in Christ you have promised to be with us always, not the way we want but the way you will. In all of life help us to trust that you hold us, even in our weakness. Give us the wisdom and strength to give up what we must in order to follow. God who knows all hear our prayer.

Bless the children of our Church. Give them the community of learning and experience that they need for this time and space. Enable us to be open to the old and the new in addressing our ministry to our children. Help us to give up what we must and take us what you give in this strange and changing environment called daily life. God who knows all...hear our prayer.

Or [15]

Presider or deacon

Let us offer prayers to God before whom all are naked and laid bare.

Deacon or other leader

For *N* our bishop and *N* our presbyter, for this holy gathering, and for the people of God in every place.

For mercy, justice, and peace among all peoples.

For good weather, abundant fruits of the earth and peaceful times.

For our city and those who live in it and for our families, companions, and all those we love.

For all those in danger and need: the sick and the suffering, the poor and the oppressed, the hungry and the homeless.

For the dying and the dead. For our deliverance from all affliction, strife, and need.

Lifting our voices with all creation, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ.

To you, O Lord.

Presider

God whose Word is living and active, hear the prayers we offer this day and help all peoples in their weakness to approach the throne of grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Notes

[1] Shalom M. Paul, *Amos: A Commentary on the Book of Amos*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, p. 175.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 178. Quoting W. Rudolph, *Joel—Amos—Obadiah—Jona* (KAT 23/2; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1971). p. 193.

[3] Han-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, p. 217.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 214.

[5] Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989, p. 133.

[6] Bruce Malina & Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992, p. 244.

[7] Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1955, p. 428.

[8] Ethelbert Stauffer, *agapao* [love], *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (ed. by Gerhard Kittel). Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, I:48.

[9] Samuel Tobias Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament: The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke*. KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1987, p. 331.

- [10] Malina, *Loc. cit.*
- [11] *Loc. cit.*
- [12] *Ibid.*, pp. 245-246.
- [13] <http://www.worship.on.ca/text/rclb9900.txt>
- [14] http://www.worship.on.ca/text/pray_b2.txt
- [15] <http://members.cox.net/oplater/prayer.htm>