

# *Christianity and Economic Justice*

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Amos 8:4-7; Luke 16:1-13

## *I.*

Sandals. Our reading from the prophet Amos says something about sandals. Let me tell you a story about the sandals of the poor. It's a story from far away from here, but maybe it has something to do with us.

It happened in Bangalore, India. I was riding in the back of what is called in India these days an "auto"—short I suppose for auto-rickshaw, a tiny vehicle with something the size of a lawnmower engine for propulsion. I was an unusual kind of a tourist—I was visiting with some Indian seminary students, and had asked to see some ministry sites. So, we were going to visit with a community of squatters, families who had lived on one city sidewalk for many years, since they had lost their homes.

Since we were in a traffic jam, there was plenty of time to talk, and one of the seminary students with me, already a seasoned young pastor, was sharing his experience dealing with the abuse of poor people in one village in South India a few hundred kilometers from where we were.

"In that town," he said, "there was a landlord who owned most of the land. And when the tenant farm workers would go out in the fields by day, the landlord acted as though he owned them as well. In particular, he had an eye for good-looking young women. And he would harass them and take advantage of them in the fields. And they felt powerless to say or do anything, because if they lost their work they would most likely starve, or at least have to leave their homes.

"Finally it became too much. And the women came to me as a local religious leader and asked whether I could help them. So, we organized a small demonstration in the market that Saturday. A few of the older women gathered and held signs accusing the landlord of mistreating his workers. But the landlord was so arrogant he thought he owned that place too. He came to the marketplace, himself, with some of his helpers, and he began to berate them and yell. He thought they would go home or give up.

But he did not own the market place. There in front of every one, the women took off their sandals. And they surrounded him, and began to hit him in the head with their sandals, a sign of great shame for him. He could not handle it, and he fled from there.” The young pastor stopped. Then he smiled wryly and went on. “He got to the bishop, I suppose. The bishop told me I was to stick to spiritual matters, or I would be reassigned to another town.” I asked him if he had stuck to spiritual matters. He didn’t smile this time. “I couldn’t. I was reassigned.”

## *II.*

In each of our human hearts, there is built in an innate sense of fairness. We may disagree on some of the specifics, but something inside us hurts, when we hear about or witness one person dealing unfairly with another. It hurts when we are children, and when we are youth, and as much as we try to shut it down as adults, it continues to hurt someplace inside when we watch it or hear about it. It hurts when the person being misused is us. But it also hurts when it is a loved one, or even when we witness someone we do not know treated unfairly. It even hurts when it is someone far away.

The prophets of the Old Testament stood between human beings and God, between the nation and God. They dispensed not just hope but also righteous anguish and anger, not just deliverance but also the promise of justice. The brief passage today from the book of the prophet Amos is both tough news and good news—at least for those whom history treats as invisible or worthless or without interest.

Why is this good news? It is good because it says that those whom the world of power treats as invisible are just as visible to God. Those who appear to be incidental, only the means to others’ ends, have value of their own. They are as entitled to as much decency and dignity as those who have grown accustomed to calling the shots—they are just as important as any other child of God.

Sandals: shoes. No human is only a means to an end; God does not want any human to be pawned either for a pair of shoes or for the manufacture thereof. In the sweatshops of Burma, Malaysia and Mexico, in the red-light districts of Rio and Chiang Mai, in the fields and orchards of North Carolina and Georgia and upstate New York, in the fast food restaurants of this city and this whole nation, this is good news. Because the reading from Amos today says in effect: “You can think that you have the last word, if you abuse those weaker than you, if you abuse the

power entrusted to you. But you don't; because God can see exactly what you do. And God does not forget. God remembers. You can pretend to yourself that no one is watching you, says Amos. Or if you are the one being treated badly, you can give up in despair, believing that no one cares. But God says: I can see and I do see. I see and I care.

Every child of God, every one of us, has built into our bones a desire for fairness, a desire to see the right thing done between neighbors. For so many of us, experience buries that longing. The experience of getting knocked down, pushed back, or, on the other side, of benefiting from unfairness have all conspired to numb us up, make us indifferent, or cause us to give up, get hard, think it can't be any better. "It's a dog eat dog world" goes the old saying. Hardly fair to the dogs, that saying. The problem is with people not dogs. We need to see again with the eyes of children: see the good, see the bad, see the puzzling and the painful, see the joy amid it all.

### **III.**

There is for most of the world today no subject more personally relevant than debt-forgiveness. I'm not sticking to spiritual matters here—I am talking credit card debt, national debt, mortgage debt AND spiritual debts.

Somehow reading the bible we tend to think about debts as a spiritual matter, but the bible deals with the issue of debts and debtors holistically, dealing with debts from the material to the spiritual and back again. The bible does not confine itself to "purely" spiritual matters.

Luke's gospel stresses that the forgiveness of debts is necessary to bringing about a new year of jubilee—Jesus wanted people to be able to overcome all the forms of gross inequality and injustice, the forces that hold down vast numbers of humans for the economic benefit of a privileged few. Along the way he was also concerned about personal integrity. He wanted us to live with each other here and now in a way that points to the day when everyone will have enough.

Today's Luke reading contains a rich collection of story and sayings about God and wealth. Listen again how it concludes:

*If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? No servant can serve two*

*masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

It's just not right to confine Jesus to "spiritual matters" and leave out the financial and material realities that pit one human being another and leave some sitting free and easy. It is spiritually empty to go around saying we are about forgiveness, peace, reconciliation while condoning bondage through debt. And yet this is commonplace for Christians. Too many of us divorce business from faith, private enterprise from personal morality. We just don't make the connections. We don't make the connections between cheap goods and slave labor.

#### IV.

Do you remember why the current bishop of Rome took the name of Francis? He did it as a specific reminder to himself that the church must be for the poor and must itself become poor. We may disagree with Pope Francis on a thousand points of doctrine! But commitment to the poor is at the heart of the gospel. We ignore it at our spiritual peril. We cannot be mystically one with all humanity, and ignore the bleeding wound of our neighbors. We cannot claim to love our neighbors as ourselves, and ignore the yawning chasms between rich and poor around us.

I do not have all the answers! I have hardly any answers! But I am reading this same gospel as you are, asking myself these questions. Where do we stand personally on wealth and poverty? How are we going to get lined up again with this Jesus who spoke so clearly about setting free the captive, about forgiving debtors, about living with a single-minded focus on love?

It isn't going to be with guilt. Guilt is a lousy place to begin any journey, spiritual or material. We need to begin instead with the experience of Grace—the experience of God's overwhelming love. To set others free we need to be set free ourselves. Let us look to where we have experienced forgiveness, and mercy—or where we need them now! The Lord's prayer says "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." What we have tasted we can invite others to taste. So, let us taste it then! Better to taste the love we have experienced from God and our neighbors and invite others to share the love. Better to take some small steps with our own projects of healing and reconciliation across the yawning chasms of class and wealth and privilege, than to operate from a spiritual deficit budget.

This is the gospel of Jesus—and it begins with the quality of real human relationships. May God open us to the surprising gift of new relationships, new community that breaks through the boundaries we have known so long they have become invisible. May God lead us into the arms of the poor, into the joy of sharing, into the explosive liberation of a new world in which we can all live together, on level ground. And may we embrace the way of Jesus, the way of simplicity, the way of love, the way of radical sharing in community with those who are no longer strangers, but friends.