

**MAKING FRIENDS WITH THE BIBLE #6**  
**Listening to Amos**  
**By David Carlson**

What comes to mind when we hear the word “prophet?” Some people think of a “seer,” someone who can predict the future. Others might picture someone going into a trance and speaking words that they do not understand.

In the Bible, a “prophet” could offer some insight into the future, but, primarily, the biblical prophet was someone who had the gift of seeing the underlying truth of the present time. Those deeper truths of life become words of wisdom for all time. A perfect example of a prophet is Amos, whose message is found in a small book in the Old Testament that bears his name.

Amos lived in the 8th century BC, a time of prosperity. Amos felt called by God to speak to the people of the northern kingdom of Israel, even though he was a citizen of the southern kingdom of Judah. His message was so unpopular that Amaziah, one of the king’s paid prophets, demanded that Amos go back home where he came from (Amos 7:12-13). Amos responded humbly that he was not a professional prophet, but a simple tree-pruner who God had instructed to travel to the northern kingdom of Israel and speak “in the name of the Lord.”

Amos’ message is timeless. Through his gift of prophecy, Amos saw below the apparent prosperity of the country to the sickness at its core. What was that sickness? Amos’ message is that the rich of the country had gained their riches by mistreating the poor of the land. Amos described how the merchants of his time had falsified the scales of the marketplace to cheat the poor. Amos also described the richest people’s luxurious palaces, where the illegal profits of the merchants were spent on furniture of the finest ivory. Finally, Amos railed against the legal system of the country, which favored the rich over the poor.

We might think that it should not take a prophet to point out such an obvious abuse of power and position. But there was a complicating factor, one that kept the richest in Israel from feeling any guilt. That complicating factor was how religious the people were.

God through Amos confronted the people on their behavior at the worship sites. Yes, the rich were very faithful to attend services. Yes, the rich liked to sing loudly the psalms, and, yes, the rich offered impressive sacrifices. All this led the people to assume that God was impressed with their piety and was happy to bless them.

The message Amos is asked by God to give to the people of Israel is this — God is not so easily fooled. God cannot be bought off in such a cheap way. Why? Because God is as concerned about how His people treat their neighbor, as how they treat God Himself. When we look at the first Ten Commandments, we note something very important. Half of those commands relate to how a person is to treat God, and the other half concerns how we are to treat one another.

Amos' concern for the poorest of our neighbors is a central theme in most of the other prophets. Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and other Old Testament prophets give the same message —we show our love for God not only in worship, but also in how we treat one another.

When Jesus was asked to summarize the entire Old Testament law, He replied, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. The second commandment is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (Mark 12:30-31). Later in the New Testament, John makes the same point: *“He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.”* (I John 4:20-21).

The message of the prophets may seem as if God demands a great deal from His followers. But this message is an expression of God's love toward us. God knows that our lives will be confusing and unfulfilling if we divide our lives between “God time” and “regular time.” God does not want to be a “part” of our lives, but involved in every moment of it, from Monday through Saturday as well as on Sunday morning.