

Plumb and Square

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: “What do you see?” the Lord asked the prophet Amos. “A plumb line” he replied. A plumb line: a very simple yet extremely accurate instrument. It hangs straight revealing true vertical so that other things can be compared to it and so adjusted that they too are aligned to true vertical. And though it may get bumped by something or blown by the wind so that it swings a bit, it always comes back to true vertical. It does this because it’s anchored from above and the inexorable Law of Gravity – the force that binds us all to the earth – causes it to point directly straight down.

But why did the Lord show Amos a plumb line? What’s the message? It’s this: the Lord has set up a plumb line: it’s his perfect, holy, unbending, unyielding, and unchangeable Law. It’s the absolute standard by which all human behavior – all our thoughts, our words, and our actions—or our lack of action – is judged. Though we try to disturb it, pushing it this way or that with our philosophical arguments, our special circumstances, and our alibis and excuses, it always comes back to true vertical showing us that when we sin in any way or for any reason, we’re out of line. It can do this because it’s not anchored here on earth where things are constantly changing and subject to corruption; but rather it is anchored from above, in God himself, who is forever perfectly just, righteous, and unchanging.

The Lord called Amos to take that plumb line, go to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and hold it up to what was going on there. “Hold it up to king and to his government. Hold it up to the behavior of the people and the way they’re living their lives. Hold it up to the religious leaders, the things they’re teaching the people, and to their worship. Then pronounce my judgment. Tell them they’re out of alignment. Tell them they’re leaning over so far they’re about to fall. Tell them to repent and to return to my absolute standard of right and wrong before it’s too late.” So that’s what Amos did.

He went as directed to the Kingdom of Israel, to its religious center in the city of Bethel. And holding up the Lord’s plumb line he saw an awful lot that was out of alignment, just like the Lord had said. Times were good there. The economy was booming and in general the nation was quite prosperous; maybe too prosperous because it gave people with means the opportunity to indulge all their worst vices. They over ate, they over drank, they lavished fortunes on fancy clothes, jewelry, cosmetics, and perfumes. And they enjoyed their entertainments. They were living the good life. Meanwhile the poor were oppressed. Widows and orphans were neglected. Some were starving. The judges and magistrates, the very people who should have been protecting the poor, were corrupt and their decisions could be bought for a price. The corruption went all the way to the top, to the king and his cronies who were filling their pockets with dirty money. Worse still was the religious life of the nation. The priests were freely mixing pagan elements into their teachings and their worship. They set up idols to represent the Lord God of Israel (and believe it or not, idols representing his wives and mistresses as well), and they encouraged such practices as cultic prostitution and infant sacrifice – things they’d borrowed from the Canaanites and their false religions. *They called* what they were doing the worship of the one true God. It was anything but that.

Amos saw all of this going on, so he went right into their unholy temple and declared God’s judgment in the hearing of all: “Unless you repent and return to the Lord God, to him

alone and to his ways, this land will be laid waste, your temples and high places will be destroyed, and you and your king will go into captivity.”

The high priest and chief prophet of the Northern Kingdom was a fellow named Amaziah. He had a good thing going and he didn't want anyone messing it up. After all, his job was easy, he was popular with the people, and he was one of the rich. And the people were quite content mixing all those pagan elements into their faith. So he immediately sent word to the king that there was an outsider stirring up a rebellion. He accused Amos of high treason for speaking against the king, apparently with the hope that Amos would be arrested and executed. And while he waited to hear from back from the king, he told Amos that he'd better run for his life. “We don't need your type around here. Go back where you came from and earn your living as a prophet there. But never again speak your depressing words of judgment around here. We don't want to hear it.”

We heard Amos' reply. “I'm not a professional prophet. And I'm not getting paid for this. I'm a shepherd and I take care of a fig orchard. But the Lord sent me here with a message, and I'm delivering it. You can't say that you haven't been warned.” Actually, we only heard part of Amos' reply. You see, Amaziah had prophesied continued peace and prosperity for the nation of Israel. He interpreted the good times they were enjoying as proof of the Lord's favor. So Amos said to Amaziah, “You don't want me prophesying against this nation? Okay, I'll give you a personal prophecy instead: When the Lord's judgment falls, your sons and daughters will be killed before your eyes, your wife will become a prostitute, and you will be dragged off in chains to an unclean, foreign land where you will die in wretched misery.” Harsh words; but within two years the prophecy of Amos was the one that proved true. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped off the map by the armies of Assyria. Its people (the survivors of the bloodbath, anyway) were taken into captivity and sold as slaves. It happened because they refused to hear God's word of warning. They didn't want to compare themselves to the perfect plumb line Amos held up before them, and consequently they failed to repent and return to the Lord.

John the Baptizer saw the plumb line too. He used it in his day to reveal the sins of the people and call them to repentance. All people: from tax collectors and prostitutes, to the soldiers, farmers, and business people, to the priests, scribes, and religious leaders, all the way up to the king himself. John held up the plumb line before them and called them all to repent of their sins because the judgment of the Lord was at hand.

We heard what happened. King Herod didn't like it when John accused him of living in adultery because he had ditched his first wife and run off and married the younger and prettier wife of his brother Philip – a woman named Herodias, who just happened to be his niece also, the daughter of yet another brother. I guess you'd call it a family affair. But make no mistake, Herod knew that what he was doing was wrong; he just didn't like having it pointed out before the whole world. It's strange: he didn't mind sinning before the whole world; but to have someone say it was a sin, *that's* what was unacceptable. So he put John in prison to silence him, publicly at least. Privately he still liked listening to John. So he'd pull him up out of the dungeon now and then to hear another scathing sermon directed against him. Herod knew the truth when he heard it, and he regarded John to be a prophet of God – even admired him for his courage; but he himself was weak. He enjoyed the pleasures of sin more than he feared God, so he refused to repent. He was willing to listen to what was right; just not willing to do it.

That wasn't good enough for Herodias, though. She didn't even want to hear what was right. She didn't care what God thought about her sin. She wanted the Baptizer dead. In the end, she got Herod to do it for her. He should have known better. When you are morally

compromised, doing what you know to be wrong, refusing to repent and trying to silence the word of God, it's only a matter of time before you get around to shooting the messenger.

A friend of mine is a pastor who recently was called to serve a congregation that's part of a Lutheran school association. He's learning the ropes about what that means. Anyway, the school board there is in the process of hiring a new teacher. The candidate they're leaning toward proudly announced in an interview that it was her intent to come to the community and promptly move in with her longtime boy friend. No plans to marry. Apparently "for financial and legal reasons" that's not convenient for the couple, and it won't be for the foreseeable future. So, my friend, who wasn't present at the interview, finds out what's going on. He contacts the board and lets them know that it's not fitting to hire a teacher for a Christian school who plans to be in flagrant violation of the Sixth Commandment. The teachers should be modeling proper behavior for the students, not teaching them by their actions that Lutheran school teachers are exempt from God's Law. If you're intent on hiring this candidate, he told them, let's find some other options for her; solve their "legal and financial" problems, and get them properly married, or find her another place to stay. Whatever. No. That's not convenient either. We like her. We're going to hire her. And we've got no business telling her how to live her life. So, let me ask a question: who do you suppose is being painted as the villain in this story? Why it's my friend, of course, who is a heartless, mean-spirited, narrow-minded Pharisee because he has the temerity to hold up the Lord's plumb line in this situation.

But regardless of the consequences, we need to do that. We need to hold it up and compare it to our nation, to the norms of our society, to our cultural values, and to the laws of our land. We need to hold it up to the entertainments with which we amuse ourselves; to the shows we watch, the music we listen to, the books we read, and the sites we visit on the internet. We need to hold it up to this church, to our doctrine and practice, and to the way we treat each other as members of the body of Christ. Most importantly, we need to hold it up to ourselves. We need to test our own thoughts, words, and actions by comparing them to God's perfect standard of what is plumb and square.

There is an absolute moral standard. There is absolute truth. And we don't get to decide what it is; it comes down from God above. And it states emphatically *this* is wrong and *this* is right. The first question is: do you believe that? You see, our culture has long since moved away from that idea into moral relativism, where there is no black and white and everything is shades of gray. As citizens of this world, it's easy to get caught up in the flow of the culture. Not long ago I read that the National Association of Evangelicals, a fairly conservative religious organization, is now recommending that Christian singles be encouraged to use contraceptives. Why? Because the assumption is that no one is chaste anymore. Sex is what singles do together. It doesn't make any difference that the Lord intends sex for marriage; no one is listening to him. We need to get real.

And listen, we've all been affected by this. It's like we're all so used to leaning in the direction of our culture, that we don't notice that we're not standing up straight. We're uncomfortable with the idea of gay marriage which, sadly, is now the law of the land – as well as being a ridiculous oxymoron – but it couldn't have happened if we had not first abandoned the idea of the sanctity of proper marriage. So many of us have bought into the ideas of easy, no-fault divorce, so called casual sex while dating, and couples shacking up outside of marriage. And it's not just in these things that pertain to the Sixth Commandment. We all agree that it's wrong to steal; but we're willing to be less than honest when filing tax returns or making insurance claims. All of us would agree it's wrong to murder; but in the case of certain abortions, say when there's rape or incest involved, or when the child is going to be severely

handicapped ... in such cases it's easy to fall into the trap of seeing gray where God's Word is black and white. It happens especially when any of these cases involve you personally or your friends and family members. That's when we start looking for exceptions and loopholes. There aren't any. About all these things and many more I could name – especially say, the Eight Commandment and the spread of gossip and slander – God's Word is perfectly clear. We need to stop disturbing the plumb line and see where we really stand with respect to it.

But that brings us to the second question. Once you realize you're leaning over and about to fall, what do you do about it? More to the point, when the Lord in his mercy sends you a faithful witness, an Amos or a John to show you that you're out of alignment (because sometimes our own perspective and ability to evaluate ourselves is out of whack), what do you do then? Will you be like Herod who was willing to listen; but unwilling to do anything about it? Will you be like Herodias who decided to shoot the messenger? Will you be like Amaziah, who threatened and accused the messenger?

Or will you do what the Lord wants? What's that? Simple: he wants you to repent. He wants you to admit your guilt. He wants you to rightly fear his wrath and judgment. He wants you to do this so that you will see you stand before him condemned and in danger of eternal hellfire. Because then he can point you to Jesus, his Son, who on the cross gave his life as the atoning sacrifice for your sins. The Lord gives us his plumb line so that we will see that on our own we are destined to fall. Then he can show us the One who lived a life perfectly plumb and square for us – and in whose righteousness we stand upright before the Lord. The Law of God can't fix us; but it's the first necessary step in showing us the One who does, so that we will place our trust in him and the mighty work he did to save us.

And this is why it's absolutely vital that we not attempt to tamper with the plumb line of God's Law; but rather to hold it up at all times before ourselves and before others to help them; because then we will all see more clearly and trust more thoroughly in our Savior Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!