

In 2002, a Kansas City pharmacist was sentenced to thirty years in federal prison for diluting 98,000 prescriptions that were sold to more than 4,200 patients. These diluted prescriptions included chemo therapy drugs.

We've heard of these kinds of crimes. Fund managers have given investors false financial reports, and when the scam was unraveled unsuspecting investors discovered they were broke. Bankers told real estate appraisers how much a home needed to be appraised at to make sue the mortgage loan was approved. When the housing market collapsed, families discovered they owed more than the home would ever be worth. What kind of people do such things?

The father of the Kansas City pharmacist was a traveling minister, who said his son had been the ideal son. That was not just the gilded memory of a child years earlier. Even as he was diluting prescriptions, the pharmacist was on the governing board of the church he attended. The people who knew him described him as a "real gentleman." How could someone raised in the church, who was still active in the church, stoop so low?

"Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, 'When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat.'"

Cries for justice such as this have given Amos the reputation of being the Prophet of Social Justice. If you want verses to use against corruption in the business world or political arena, Amos is the "go to" book.

It's easy to apply our reading from Amos today to those sensational cases that garner national attention. It's easy for the ninety-nine percent to point at the one percent and say, "Those are the people he was talking about." But what if the warning from Amos applies to us as well?

In his description of the attitude of those who oppressed the poor, Amos tells us they said, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath so that we may offer wheat for sale?"

The new moon, or the first day of the month, and the Sabbath, were set aside as days of rest. They were days on which the people were to focus their attention toward the Lord. Although those who oppressed the poor apparently observed the prohibition against conducting business on those days, they were anxious for those days to pass so they could get back to what they really wanted to do.

When I was growing up in Colorado, in the Mountain Time Zone, the early football games started at noon. During football season, the pastor knew he had better wrap things up by 11:30 or people might not make it home in time for the opening kickoff. If the sermon went a little long, people started looking at their watches. If the pastor continued a few people started coughing before they looked at their watches. When will the sermon be over so we can get to the game?

The root of injustice in Israel was idolatry. They may have observed the Sabbath, but their minds were not on the Lord. Their thoughts were about how they could make more money the next day. If their thoughts had really turned toward the Lord, they would not have cheated their customers. They would not have oppressed the poor.

There is always a danger that we can have a formalistic view of the church and of the sacraments. That's one reason we're going to be looking at the sacraments this year in our gift program. We need to remember that we are approaching the living God when we gather on Sunday. It's an awesome privilege, and we must never take it lightly.

There has been a great deal of talk about social justice in the last couple of years. There was the Occupy Wall Street movement. Today there is the Black Lives Matter movement. Whether you agree with all these movements have to say, they are pointing to the fact that there is injustice in our society.

This is not the first time we've had these kinds of movements. In fact, there were social justice movements at the time of the foundation of our nation. We've been trying to get it right for two hundred and forty years. You might think that we would have overcome injustice by now. Although we have made strides in the right direction, the more we fight to overcome injustice, the more it appears that we are powerless to overcome it.

Perhaps the problem is that we have not addressed the root of the issue. Perhaps we have tried to overcome injustice without having to give up our idolatry. Idolatry will always breed injustice. We can never rightly love our neighbor unless we rightly love God first.

Jesus said, "No slave 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."

We cannot serve two masters. We cannot serve the Lord and an idol. The two will always come into conflict, and we will have to choose which one to serve.

The pharmacist who diluted prescriptions while serving on the governing board of his church had to choose between serving the Lord and serving wealth. When it got to that point, it was a pretty clear cut choice. For most people it is not so obvious. For many of us, the choice might be that we can modify our lifestyle a little to have more time and resources to devote to the service of the Lord and of others. Do we really need to eat out as often as we do? Do we really need the latest smart phone, or designer fashion? If we are devoted to the Lord, the answers will be fairly simple. If we have made wealth an idol, our hearts will be pulled in different directions.

Wealth is not the only idol that causes leads to injustice. For some people physical appearance is an idol. For others social status is an idol. For some political power is an idol. For others relationships are an idol. If we give our hearts to any master other than the Lord, it will lead us to act with injustice.

There is a way to social justice. That way is to make the Lord our Master. We cannot mistreat our neighbor when we devote ourselves to Jesus. We cannot deal dishonestly when we are serving the Lord. We cannot help but seek freedom for the oppressed when our thoughts are focused on Jesus and what he has done for us.

Jesus wants to set us free from injustice. He wants to set us free from idolatry. When we give our hearts to him, we will find that freedom.