

## Not a Tame Lion: *Beware of Religion*

Amos 4:1-13

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn at HCC on 2/17/2013

### Introduction

- ❖ Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. It is the new religion in America. That is a label sociologists have come up with to describe the religious beliefs of a good majority of Americans, especially those among the younger generation.
  - ▶ These are people who most likely self-identify as Christians, but when you dig deeper (and it often doesn't take much digging) you realize their belief system has strayed so far from historic, biblical Christianity that it has become a religion unto itself. One that is best described as **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**.
  
- ❖ It's a form of *Deism* because the vast majority of Americans still claim to believe in God but not an intimately personal One. It's a God who made you but not particularly involved with you. That is, except when you need him every so often to resolve a problem you can't fix on your own. A Cosmic Butler is the term often used to describe him.
  - ▶ And this God's approach to problem-solving is compared to a therapist. This is why they use the label *Therapeutic*. The central tenet of this religion is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. And God's job as a Divine Therapist is to help us get there.
    - This new religion is *Moralistic*, but admittedly the term is loosely used. It's a weak moralism. A therapeutic God can't place too many moral obligations on you if his job is to help *you* achieve self-actualization. The most he can ask is for you to be nice to others. The only ethical demand is "Don't be a jerk".
  
- ❖ That this describes the religious belief system of countless Americans is alarming, but what is really sad is that sociologists are suggesting Moralistic Therapeutic Deism has begun to "colonize" American Christianity. That means you can hold on to these beliefs and comfortably coexist in a church and not have to shed your Christian identity.
  
- ❖ That's a problem. That's a kind of religion we need to beware. It's a man-made, man-centered, man-serving religion. God hates it (Amos 5:21) and so should we.
  - ▶ Now I'm not one to do away with the term "religion" altogether. James 1:27 speaks of "*religion that is pure and undefiled before God.*" It consists of visiting orphans and widows in their affliction and keeping oneself unstained from the world.
  
- ❖ So there is a kind of pure religion we are to practice for the sake of God and neighbor. This is the kind of religion that Amos was trying to promote in his book. **But in a sinful heart, pure religion can be defiled and twisted into something ugly – into something that allows a worshiper to actually avoid God and remain indifferent to neighbor.**
  - ▶ This is what Amos was condemning among the religious of his day. As we'll see, these people were a very religious bunch. They would outshine most of us. But this morning's passage does a good job of exposing the true nature of their religion.
  
- ❖ Again, I'm not condemning religion per se, but I do want to warn you of three particular kinds of religion: **1) Beware of *empty* religion. 2) Beware of *busy* religion. 3) Beware of *benumbing* religion.**

## Beware of Empty Religion

- ❖ Let's consider the first warning: **1) Beware of empty religion that excuses indifference towards the poor and needy among you.** Let me put that another way: Any religion that allows its worshipers to exploit the poor, oppress the weak, withhold justice from the victimized, or to just remain indifferent – is a dead religion.
  - ▶ James 2:14-17 says, *“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*
  
- ❖ **What good is a faith that utters a few religious cliches but ultimately turns a blind eye to the poor and needy?** If the religion you practice can coexist with moral corruption – if it can live in harmony with exploitation and oppression – then it's a dead, empty religion.
  
- ❖ This is what Amos is saying in vv1-3. Remember he's preaching to the inhabitants of Samaria the capital of Israel, the northern kingdom. It was a time of great prosperity. Their economy was growing and so was the disparity between the rich and poor. And the shameful thing is that the rich were getting richer – not by plundering other nations – but by plundering their own people, the poor and needy among them.
  
- ❖ We've already seen Amos condemn the leading men of Samaria for their hand in oppression (2:6-8; 3:9-10). But now here in 4:1, he calls out the leading women for their part in all this corruption. *“Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’”* So it is not just the men who stood guilty of oppressing and crushing. Their wives were just as culpable.
  
- ❖ Now granted these women were probably not actively oppressing anyone. They weren't subjugating the poor under crushing debt (2:6), or cheating them in the marketplace (8:5-6), or depriving them of justice in the courts (5:12). Their husbands were.
  - ▶ But a reason why these husbands were doing such oppressive things was because they were under pressure to maintain the opulent lifestyles that their wives so enjoyed.
  
- ❖ We see this at the end of v1 where the *“cows of Bashan”* are demanding their husbands to fetch them drinks! Now calling them cows was not meant to be a comment on their appearance. Bashan was a region in Israel known for its fertile land and well-fed cattle. This was more of a condemnation against their self-indulgent lifestyle.
  - ▶ Amos's point is that these women were just as guilty as their husbands. Whether you're actively oppressing or just passively letting it happen, the heart motivation is the same. You're serving yourself at the expense of another.

- ❖ *Now how could they justify their behavior? **How could they have such little regard for the poor and needy and not feel any sense of guilt or have any fear of judgment?*** Answer: Empty religion. The texts says they were offering daily sacrifices and tithing every three days. Like I said, they blow us away. They were devoted to their religion and all its practices.
- ❖ And it was this kind of devotion that fooled them into thinking they were okay. **The belief system they constructed allowed them to live in sinful indifference towards the poor and needy and yet still maintain a sense that they were pleasing God.**
  - ▶ Now we look at them and wonder how they could be so blind to the incongruity. *How can anyone expect their religious devotion to excuse or exempt them from helping the helpless when they have it in their power to at least do something?*
- ❖ But, friends, isn't that the question we need to ask ourselves? *Have I been using my religious lifestyle to justify an affluent lifestyle that has grown indifferent to the plight of the poor and needy around me?* That is what religion can subtly do in your heart.
- ❖ **Beware of religion – especially the therapeutic kind that so many have bought into.** If we all stop trying to be someone we're not and start being true to ourselves, you might think that'll make for a better world. But this kind of religion is not producing a more just society.
  - ▶ Think about it. If God's primary aim is to help you become more true to yourself, to have a healthier self-esteem – then such a religion will not likely produce a society of selfless, community-minded citizens but more likely a bunch of narcissistic, navel-gazing individuals.
- ❖ If the moral life is about becoming the kind of person others will like, someone who is non-judgmental and tolerant of everyone else's pursuit of self-actualization – then all you're left with in this religion is a subjective sense of morality unable to bring forth a just society.
  - ▶ **Without an objective moral standard and the willingness to place moral obligations on its followers, a religion stands empty.** It offers empty promises of being a light to the world.
- ❖ This was confirmed by the research of the sociologists who coined the term Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Analyzing the results of a study on the spiritual lives of American twentysomethings, they wrote, *“The majority of those interviewed stated ... that nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people.... Most of those interviewed said that it is nice if people help others, but that nobody has to. Taking care of other people in need is an individual's choice. If you want to do it, good. If not, that's up to you.... Even when pressed— What about victims of natural disaster or political oppression? What about helpless people who are not responsible for their poverty or disabilities? What about famines and floods and tsunamis?— No, they replied. If someone wants to help, then good for that person. But nobody has to.”*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 68. Quoted in Ross Douhat's *Bad Religion* (Kindle Locations 4712-4717).

- ▶ Nobody has to. If that's how you're wired, if that's your thing, then great. But don't force your morality on other people. Sound familiar?
- ❖ **But let me tell you about the kind of religion that *can* produce a more just society.** It's the kind that centers on a holy God who puts forth his holiness as the objective moral standard by which the world will be measured. **His primary aim is not to help you become more true to yourself but to transform you to more closely reflect his truth and holiness.**
  - ▶ And in this religion, there are moral obligations. **There is a communal responsibility we have towards one other as fellow creatures made in the image of the same God.** And if we are unfaithful to carry out these obligations, then this holy God has sworn by his holiness to hold us to account.
- ❖ Look at vv2-3. Here the Lord swears an oath by his holiness that in coming days the walls will be breached and the cows of Bashan and their husbands will be led into exile. God will expose the emptiness of their religion.
  - ▶ Beware, lest you find yourselves practicing an empty religion with an empty sense of morality. You can be sure our holy God will one day expose it for what it's worth.

### **Beware of Busy Religion**

- ❖ My second warning is this: **2) Beware of busy religion that aims for the attention of man rather than the presence of God.** In other words, be aware that you can seek religion without seeking God. **You can do religion while having nothing to do with God.**
  - ▶ Now at first you might think that makes no sense since isn't religion itself the seeking of God? Not so. Amos' point is that some religion is just busy religious activity done primarily for the praise of man – not for the praise of God.
- ❖ That's his point in vv4-5. These verses should be read in a sarcastic manner. He's mocking them. He mimics a normal call to worship. Here he says, "*Come to Bethel, and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression*". He's goading them on to come and sin more. The sacrifices they thought would bring forgiveness and relief was an exercise in futility. It was just heaping more guilt and more burden on their heads.
- ❖ Now Bethel was the primary center of worship for the northern kingdom. Back in the day when Jeroboam led ten tribes to break away from Judah, he tried to deter his people from regularly traveling to Jerusalem for the annual assemblies at Solomon's temple.
  - ▶ So he constructed an alternative worship center in the city of Bethel (1 Kg. 12:25-33). He created new altars, crafted idols in the form of golden calves, established a new priesthood, and built high places of worship in cities like Bethel, Dan, and Gilgal.
- ❖ **And since those days, the Israelites have been coming to worship on these high places with great fervency and dedication.** Israelite law only mandated three assemblies (Ex. 23:14-17). So at bare minimum you and your family might offer three sacrifices a year. You

were also to give an annual tithe from the produce of your land and an additional tithe every third year for those without land, which included the poor (Deut. 14:22).

- ▶ So you see these Israelites were very religious. They sacrificed daily. They tithed every three days. They would bring sacrifices of thanksgiving and free-will offerings. They were freely willing! It says they loved to do these things. But in all of this they were multiplying transgression. It was just busy religion.
- ❖ I don't doubt their fervency. I'm sure they really loved what they were doing. Their emotions were real. But they weren't drawing closer to God. They were moving further away. Now there were two reasons: Their religion was not *grounded in* or *aimed at* the right things.
  - ❖ **First, their religion was not grounded in God's truth.** The Law given to Moses provided clear instructions for the who, what, when, and how of worship. But instead they constructed a man-made religion to fit their needs. In all their religious fervor, they were drawing close to a god but not the One True God. Rather a god made in their own image.
  - ❖ **Second, they were moving further from God because their religion was not aimed at him. It was aimed at fellow man.** Look in v5 at how Amos mocks them for how much they love to proclaim and publish their religiosity for all to hear and read about.
    - ▶ Their worship was not aimed at making much of God but making much of themselves. It looked spiritual. It looked dedicated. But their religion was not about seeking God. It was about seeking man's praise.
      - That explains why all of God's numerous threats and warnings, in vv6-11, were all rebuffed. It explains why they never returned to God. They never wanted to be near him in the first place.
  - ❖ This is what I find so troubling with the modified Deism of popular religion. **There are so many people in church on Sunday mornings.** So many bringing their sacrifices of praise, faithfully giving their tithes and offerings – **and yet so many would prefer to keep God at at safe and comfortable distance.**
    - ▶ Of course, they want him close enough that he can hear us when we call. When life overwhelms, and we can't figure it out on our own. But they don't want God always intruding or interjecting himself in their plans and decisions.
      - So they might give God an hour and a half on Sundays and hope that's enough to keep him at bay. But even in that hour and a half, all their singing and praying is done ultimately for those sitting in the pew and not for the One sitting on the throne.
  - ❖ **Anyone who is actually convinced that God is pleased by this kind of religion perhaps needs someone to sarcastically mock them once in a while.** Go ahead! If you think God is pleased by your busy religion, go ahead and worship! Go ahead and multiply transgression!

- ▶ Hopefully that'll wake them up to see the foolishness of their ways. Hopefully they'll come to their senses and return to the Lord. But sadly the longer one is trapped in empty, busy religion, the more desensitized their spiritual senses get.

### Beware of Benumbing Religion

- ❖ That leads us to our third warning: **3) Beware of benumbing religion that allows you to dismiss or soften God's threats.** This kind of warning screams loud and clear in vv6-13, but sadly too many are too deaf to hear it.
  - ▶ The Lord goes on to list out the many ways he has tried in the past to get Israel's attention, so that they might return to him in closer fellowship.
- ❖ The Lord implies he sent a **famine** in the past. "*Cleanness of teeth*" in v6 is a euphemism for hunger. They had no bread to cling to their teeth. Yet they did not return to him.
  - ▶ So he withheld the rain according to v7. He caused a **drought**. Yet they did not return to him. So in v9 it says the Lord struck what little crops they had left with **blight** and **mildew**. Yet they did not return. So v10 says he sent a **disease** among them just like he did against Egypt in the days of the Exodus.
    - He stirred up **war** and their army fell to the sword. Yet nothing. So he overthrew them like in the days when he overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah, and still they did not return to him! The point is these things didn't happen by coincidence. The Lord did it.
- ❖ I know that's hard to accept. Over the past two weeks in Amos chapters 1-3, we've been confronted with a depiction of God that would shock a lot of religious people. **Much of religion these days has made God out to be nice, tame, and manageable.** Anything about his character that might make us squirm has been reinterpreted. Anything he might have said in Scripture that rubs us wrong or makes us uncomfortable has been explained away.
  - ▶ And what you end up with is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. **It's religion with a Christian varnish and a neutered God who would never threaten you.** But seriously, what do you do with a passage like this? Here God is saying, "*I withheld this. I sent that. I overthrew you. I did it. I did it. I did it.*"
- ❖ I like what one writer says, "*If we take God seriously, he will most certainly mess up our lives, make us uncomfortable, and even disorient us. After all, we can easily get accustomed to our own self-serving agendas and idols. The atheist has it almost right: humans regularly do make gods in their image. Yet the biblical God isn't the kind we make up.*"<sup>2</sup>
  - ▶ I find that last thought comforting. I'm glad I don't serve a therapeutic God who is all about helping me feel good about myself – who would never judge me, much less lay a finger on me. I can come up with a God like that. That kind of God comes natural to me. Probably because it's a projection of myself. A god in my own image.pg.

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 193.

- **So as paradoxical as it might sound, take comfort in the fact that you're following a God that can make you very uncomfortable.** It means he's not a figment of your imagination. You would have never imagined a God like that.
- ❖ Now listen to the final threat that this God issues to his chosen people in Amos' day. Look at v12. *"<sup>12</sup>Therefore thus I will do to you, O Israel; because I will do this to you, prepare to meet your God, O Israel!" <sup>13</sup>For behold, he who forms the mountains and creates the wind, and declares to man what is his thought, who makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights of the earth- the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name!"*
  - ▶ Israel is told to prepare herself to meet God face to face. Next time he wont send a famine or a drought or an army. Next time he will come himself. *"Prepare to meet your God, O Israel!"*
    - There is no doubt a statement like that was meant to get knees shaking and hands trembling. It was meant to put the fear of God in us.
- ❖ But even so, there is a glimmer of hope, a note of grace, that I don't want you to miss. No doubt v12 is a severe warning to the Israelites, but notice how he says, "Prepare to meet **your** God!" That one little personal possessive pronoun 'your' is huge. That is covenantal language being used (Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12). **He's not just a God or the God. He is your God, and you are his people, O Israel!**
  - ▶ The only other time God is addressed this way in all of Amos is at the end in chapter 9:15. The book ends with words of encouragement speaking of a future restoration for Israel, and it signs off with *"says the Lord your God"*.
- ❖ I believe the same tone of encouragement we find there should be felt here in chapter 4:12. **Yes, I have to prepare myself to meet a holy and righteous God. But thank goodness he is my holy and righteous God.** Yes, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31). So I sure am glad that he is *my* living God!

## Conclusion

- ❖ **If you're a Christian, you need to read a passage like this and let it sting where it's meant to sting AND comfort where it's meant to comfort.** Christian, you should take comfort in your identity as an adopted child of God – as one freely received into his family as you freely received his Son.
  - ▶ But don't let your status as a child of God lull you into complacency and a false sense of security. Know in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God will discipline you (Deut. 8:5).
- ❖ Growing up in my family, there came a point in time when my brother and I no longer feared my mother's discipline. We no longer feared her spanking. Well she was no fool. She realized it, and so she changed her strategy. From then on, if we were being bad, she would threaten us with, "You just wait until Daddy gets home." Now that still put the fear in us! Neither of us wanted to meet Daddy in discipline.

- ▶ It could be another hour or in a few minutes, but when that garage door would start opening, my knees would start shaking. **I had to prepare to meet Daddy. That is a fearful thing. Yet there was never a moment's doubt that this was *my* Daddy.**
  
- ❖ Yes, I was afraid. But even in my fear, I had the sensibility to know that I was never in jeopardy of abandonment or of being kicked out of the family. **I feared the discipline I deserved, but never once did I question my status as a son in the family.** Christian, that's the same kind of sober confidence you need when you have to meet your Heavenly Father in discipline.
  
- ❖ **Now if you are not a Christian, I hope that the contrast is becoming clear between popular American religion and historic, biblical Christianity.** If you keep coming to this church and keep listening to the teaching of God's Word, you'll learn more about religion.
  - ▶ But not a moralistic religion where the highest moral standard is to just be nice. Or a therapeutic religion where the chief end of man is to be happy and feel good about oneself. Or a deistic religion where God is purposely kept at a comfortable distance.
  
- ❖ **No, you'll learn about pure religion – the kind that centers on a holy, loving God who sought us when we were poor and needy, when we had nothing to repay his kindness.** In this religion, God came close and got his hands and feet dirty with our filth. And in the ultimate act of love, he took our filth and sin upon himself and nailed it all to the cross.
  - ▶ And then he rose again. He gave us new life, and called us to follow him, to now imitate him by seeking the poor and needy, by showing them kindness, by getting close and willing to get our hands and feet dirty as we serve them in love.
    - **This is the Christian religion, and we invite you to make it yours.** We all have to meet God one day. We want you to be prepared. Our prayer is that you'll be meeting *your* God. That's possible, my friends, if you turn to his Son Jesus and receive him by faith.