

Earn Your Bread Elsewhere

Amos 7:10-17 (NIV84)

¹⁰ Then Amaziah the priest of Bethel sent a message to Jeroboam king of Israel: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. ¹¹ For this is what Amos is saying: "'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.'" ¹² Then Amaziah said to Amos, "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. ¹³ Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom." ¹⁴ Amos answered Amaziah, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. ¹⁵ But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.' ¹⁶ Now then, hear the word of the LORD. You say, "'Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac.'" ¹⁷ Therefore this is what the LORD says: "'Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land.'"

It's a priest vs. prophet throw down. Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, is reporting to his King Jeroboam II of Israel what the prophet is saying: "Amos is raising a conspiracy against you in the very heart of Israel. The land cannot bear all his words. For this is what Amos is saying: 'Jeroboam will die by the sword, and Israel will surely go into exile, away from their native land.'" (verses 10-11)

Without waiting for a response from the king, Amaziah casts the first stone at Amos. "Get out, you seer! Go back to the land of Judah. Earn your bread there and do your prophesying there. Don't prophesy anymore at Bethel, because this is the king's sanctuary and the temple of the kingdom." (verses 12-13) Amaziah will not have Amos spreading this dissenting message anymore. He reasons that Amos would only preach such a thing if he was paid to do so. So, Amos, go earn your living prophesying somewhere else. We don't want your kind here. Go back where you came from. Get paid by those people in Judah. Don't bother us here in Bethel. Don't disturb my king. Don't disturb my faith.

As it was with Amaziah's rebuke to Amos, a certain suspicion arises with those who make a living preaching God's Word full time, that they preach to get paid. In other words, they tailor their message so as to get themselves a paycheck and have job security, to earn their bread. Can you trust a paid preacher?

The sad reality is that your pastor, and any pastor for that matter, is a sinner. He is prone to temptations. He is fallible. Yes, there are pastors who preach messages thinking about how they can keep their job and keep getting paid. They are in it for the money. Because of that, they will preach controversial messages that will put them in the lime light and get them fame and recognition. Others will preach what itching ears want to hear, maintain the status quo, make people feel warm and fuzzy, and thus keep up their steady stream of income. Those are the preachers that we hear about who roll in Bentleys and own mansions. Preachers worked for paychecks before Amos, and continue to do so long after him.

Is it right for you, or any congregation for that matter, to pay a man to proclaim God's Word to them? Should a preacher be able to earn his bread this way? Divorcing ourselves from God's Word for a moment, there is a pietistic attitude that wants to see any preacher give his efforts without pay. He should preach to us whether he's getting paid or not. Isn't that what he asks all of us to do as congregation members? Volunteer for this. Help out with that. Donate to this cause. God asks all his people to go above and beyond for him without necessarily being compensated for it. So, why should the pastor earn a paycheck doing things that he asks us to do without pay?

The Bible has many examples of people rightfully earning a living as they serve as proclaimers of God's Word. Before Amos, the Israelite tribe of Levi, who served as priests and temple workers, earned their money from the offerings of the people. The Israelites gave them land, food, and money. In the New Testament era, women such as Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and many others supported Jesus' ministry out of their own means. Paul, the apostle who often went about his trade as tent-maker so that he could preach the gospel free of charge said that "The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel." (1 Corinthians 9:14) Even in our Gospel reading today Jesus said to his disciples, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you leave that town." (Mark 6:10) The 12 disciples were relying on the hospitality of the people where they went preaching. God commanded that people who preach God's Word should receive their living, earn their bread, from doing so.

But Amos is not in Israel to earn bread. He answers Amaziah's charged statements: "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son, but I was a shepherd, and I also took care of sycamore-fig trees. But the LORD took me from tending the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'" (verses 14-15) Amos didn't grow up learning to be a prophet. This isn't a family trade. This isn't even what he was trained to do. He was a shepherd and one who took care of sycamore fig trees. Basically, he was a hick, a country bumpkin. He is not some great priest or prophet. He is just a man. The LORD called just a man, a shepherd, a farmer. The LORD took a farmer from his work and called him to preach his Word to the nation of Israel, and Amos took up the call.

What are you paying me to do? Are you paying me as a congregation to preach you messages that give you warm fuzzies? Do you pay me to play referee and force everyone to get along? Or do you pay me to show you your sin and direct you to your Savior?

The pastors in our church body are called to serve in their various capacities, not hired to earn bread. We don't have self-made resumes. We don't take calls to "move on up" or get promoted. We do train; we go through eight years of schooling. But at the end of it, we submit ourselves as willing to serve wherever the LORD sees fit to place us in order to preach his Word, confront sin, and lead people to the salvation that God offers, his full and free forgiveness. When guided by God's Word, our pastors do not preach in order to earn a living. We preach because it is God's Word, and it needs to be preached. And that is why Amos is there in Israel, even though he could be doing so many other things to earn his bread.

If someone is preaching only to earn bread, then this attitude needs to be judged. Look at Amaziah. His rejection to Amos's preaching is based on the trouble it's causing the nation to hear the message and on the fact that it threatens the king's house and the nation with eventual destruction. Amaziah realizes that to keep his position, to keep earning bread for himself and his family, he has to keep peace in Israel. Amos threatens that. Nowhere in Amaziah's reasoning do you hear that this is what the LORD says or does he give any commands from God that Amos's message is wrong. Amaziah commands Amos to stop preaching in order to protect his job, his paycheck. He is not interested in what God's Word actually says. He is accusing Amos of what he himself is doing. Amaziah is acting as priest primarily to earn his bread.

Amos then does what any true preacher of God's Word does. He tells people what God's Word says even when they would prefer to ignore it. "Now then, hear the word of the LORD. You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and stop preaching against the house of Isaac.' Therefore this is what the LORD says: 'Your wife will become a prostitute in the city, and your sons and daughters will fall by the sword. Your land will be measured and divided up, and you yourself will die in a pagan country. And Israel will certainly go into exile, away from their native land.'" (verses 16-17)

Such harsh words, but that is God's judgment (not Amos's) upon those who refuse to hear God's Word for what it actually says. The pastors who preach only to earn their bread, preaching what people want to hear in order to earn a living, God will judge them as he did Amaziah.

For the pastor who earns his living by being a minister of the gospel, Amos is a role model. Instead of thinking of how they can earn their bread by what they do, they work their hardest so that you can know God and what he has done to save you from your sins. Following Amos's lead, these pastors preach judgment not for their personal gain, but for yours. They preach not as if it saves their souls by doing so, but to have God save yours. He preaches not so that you become complacent in your Christian life, but that you would strive more and more to follow God's will for your life. He preaches judgment so that you can have peace, that you can have a home with God in heaven instead of exiled to the torments of hell. Pastors preach to turn people to repentance and salvation, to give you life instead of death, not with the self-centered mindedness to put food on the table and nothing more.

Never be ashamed that you go to a church that pays its pastor to preach God's Word to you. Instead, continue to support your pastor and pastors all over the world. Support them with your prayers. Pray that they would remain faithful to the Word of God and never compromise it for the sake of money or for the status quo. Support them by encouraging them with Scripture. He needs to hear it just like you do. Support them with your time, your talents, and your treasures. Support them not to earn their bread, but support them to preach only what God says so that others will gain heaven instead of judgment. Amen.