

PROPHETIC PREACHING then and now

by

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CHAPTER FOUR

PROTESTING AGAINST SOCIAL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS

"Let judgment [justice] run down as the waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream"
(Amos 5:24).

"He hath shown thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8)

It takes conviction, character, and courage to fulfill the duties of a true prophet. Prophets who follow in the train of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Micah must have the unflinching courage which can be built only upon convictions as deep as one's soul. Such courage can be maintained only by a character which is built on faith in GOD. That type of courage is everlastingly essential when a preacher attacks social unrighteousness. The unrighteous people feel that they are being attacked personally, and they fight back. A social reformer must put on the whole armor of GOD, especially the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness and the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:14-17).

The Foundation of Social Righteousness Is Theological

Deep convictions against social unrighteousness are based on deep convictions about the righteousness of GOD. The burden of an enslaved nation came upon the heart of Moses in full force through the experience he had with GOD at the burning bush on Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3:1-10).

The mighty heart-power behind Isaiah's preaching against unrighteousness was his sense of the majesty and holiness of GOD. He saw the Lord in the temple, high and lifted up, with the seraphim singing **"Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory"** (Isaiah 6:3). Thereafter, the Lord was ever the **"holy one of Israel"** to him.

After a vision like that, no preacher could ever be insensible to the woeful oppression of the poor by the greedy, or indifferent to the perverted justice in the courts of the land where verdicts were bought and sold, or without resentment against the haughty arrogance of the rich ladies as well as the men. The memory of that exalted vision was a constant reminder that GOD was righteous, and his character demanded righteousness in men.

Amos was one of the mightiest preachers of social righteousness of all times. He loosed blistering sermons like lightning flashes against covetousness, dishonesty, inhumanity toward the poor, perverted justice, and immorality. The people were either insensible to, or antagonistic toward, the Lord of Hosts. He cried out with all his soul for the people to prepare to meet GOD (Amos 4:12), to seek the Lord and live (Amos 5:6). It is no wonder. To him the righteous Lord was universally sovereign; to him such a GOD demanded rightful dealings of men with men.

The dominant theme of his sermons, "**Let justice roll down like the waters,**" is a superior text for prophetic preaching today.

It was Hosea's intense love for GOD which made him so fierce and intense in his denunciation of the sins which outraged the love of GOD, and which made him plead so tenderly for men to repent.

Ezekiel's pastoral ministry of encouragement and reproof and inspiration began with his vision of GOD, a vision of his purity, majesty, and glory (Ezekiel 1:28). Consequently he condemned the current sins of his people, such as promiscuity among the sexes, oppression of the poor, laxness of the law, all spawned by forgetfulness of GOD.

Possibly the social sins so prevalent in America today are due partially to the lack of deep, earnest, prophetic preaching on the holiness and righteousness of GOD. The nation needs more preachers like Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah.

The country's newsstands are full of vulgar literature, its business is plagued with dishonesty, its schools are all too full of cheating, its homes are increasingly full of worldliness and drunkenness, its picture shows and television programs are laden with lewdness and crime, its family altars are decaying, and its pulpits are offering entirely too much apathetic and irrelevant preaching.

Social Sins Specifically Condemned by Name

All too many pulpit gestures are made by wide-spreading arms rather than by pointed fingers. The Old Testament prophets were not given to preaching vague generalities; they called sins by their names. They were not like hunters using shotguns which scatter the shot; they used high-powered rifles.

For instance, they made continual attacks on the two sins of sexual immorality and alcoholic drink, the sins which have been like twin cancers eating the hearts out of all the great civilizations which have collapsed.

Hosea said, "**Whoredom and wine and new wine take away the heart**" (Hosea 4:11). He sobbed out the scathing indictment: "**By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood**" (Hosea 4:2. See also 6:10, 7:4-5). Hosea gave the basic reason for all this iniquity: "**For Israel has forgotten his Maker**" (Hosea 8:14).

Early in his prophecy Isaiah began to denounce specific sins such as insincere worship, bribery, idolatry, unjust oppression, greed for land, and addiction to strong drink (Isaiah 1:11, 23; 2:8, 18; 3:14-15; 5:8, 11, 22). He denounced the drinking of alcohol, using almost nauseating language to picture the revolting spectacle of drunken priests and false prophets (Isaiah 28:7-8).

Listen to Habakkuk: "**Woe unto him that giveth his neighbor drink, that putteth thy bottle to him, and maketh him drunken also, that thou mayest look on their nakedness!**" (Habakkuk 2:15). Did they have cocktail parties then?

It is a grave question whether or not the liquor consumption and sexual immorality in Jerusalem needed prophetic condemnation more than they do today in Washington, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, and other places throughout the nation. In this day when sexual promiscuity and drunkenness have reached such a dreadful stage, a preacher cannot feel remotely that he is doing prophetic preaching unless he is crying out in no uncertain language against these horrible enemies of personal morality and national security.

May GOD give America prophets who will dare to declare the physical death, sociological disaster, economic wreckage, moral and spiritual doom, which drunkenness and adultery inevitably will bring.

May GOD save us from a "cocktail culture" in a society which must have an alcoholic drink to keep from being bored.

Demands for Social Righteousness

When Walter Rauschenbusch (d. 1918) began writing books about the social emphasis of the Gospel of JESUS, there arose a division of thought about whether the Gospel of CHRIST was a personal Gospel or a social Gospel. Those in both schools of thought have come to realize that there is only one Gospel of CHRIST, with both personal and social applications. These two elements are like the two halves of an orange, each needed to make a perfect whole.

Old Testament prophets preached both a right relation to GOD and a righteous relation with one's fellowmen. When a man's heart is regenerated by the Holy Spirit he has a new capacity and a new inner urge for righteous and peaceable relations with other people.

The prophets of Israel cried out for justice in the courts and fairness between people. They bemoaned the fact that verdicts in court trials were a marketable commodity that could be bought or sold by bribery. "**Therefore the law is slacked, and judgment [justice] doth never go forth: for the wicked doth compass about the righteous; therefore wrong judgment proceedeth**" (Habakkuk 1 :4). When justice to all is not meted out impartially by the law of the land, it destroys one of the divinely built foundations of a righteous social order.

A social sin which was prevalent in Judah and Israel, a sin which aroused the prophets to indignant denunciation, was that of accursed greed for land and money. They were not inveighing against private ownership nor were they advocating socialism. They preached against an economic order which fostered mortgages and such heavy taxation that poor people were reduced to practical slavery. The merchants had two standards of measurement, a big measure to

buy with and a small one to sell by. Worse than that, they put the bad wheat on the bottom of the bushel measure and the good on the top (Amos 8:5-6).

Isaiah was genuinely aroused. When greed of gain and covetousness were sapping the moral strength of the people and the nation, he thundered:

"Ye have eaten up the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What mean ye that ye beat my people to pieces, and grind the faces of the poor? saith the Lord God of Hosts" (Isaiah 3:14-15).

"Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place" (Isaiah 5:8).

Micah was equally as indignant:

"They covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage" (Micah 2:2)

". . . who pluck off their skin from off them, and their flesh from off their bones; who also eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them; and they break their bones, and chop them in pieces, as for the pot, and as flesh within the caldron" (Micah 3:2-3).

Is not materialism in the present world as vicious and idolatrous as it was in the days of the prophets?

Merchants who put the rotten apples on the bottom of the basket and who fix their scales to make things heavier are not unheard of in most any town. Just how much is the desire for better business relations a dominant motive for affiliation with the church? Are not the deeds of greedy grafters and methods of dishonest profiteers today as worthy of pulpit denunciation as ever? An ungodly economic order, where the rich grow richer by excessively large profits and the poor grow poorer because of inadequate wages, is a challenge to a sympathetic prophet to preach the remedy by outlining the Scriptural principles of Christian stewardship.

In a capitalistic society a prophet who follows the pattern of preaching set by the Old Testament prophets must warn people against the idolatry of money-worship, against the deceitfulness of riches, against excessive love for the mammon of unrighteousness.

Worship of money is a form of practical atheism.

Neither the prophets nor JESUS taught that money itself was evil. They taught that the evil of it was the wrong desire for money, or the wrong method of acquiring money, or the wrong use of money. No man is better spiritually than his attitude toward money and material things which money can buy.

Social Sins Often Begin with Unrighteous Leadership

It may cost the life of a prophet if he attacks the sinful leadership of kings or priests or false

prophets. The Old Testament prophets boldly and bravely did so, if they felt that the private life or public policies of a leader led others into unrighteousness.

When Ahab used his authority as king to have Naboth stoned in order to get possession of his vineyard, Elijah's righteous indignation led him into a bitter denunciation of the iniquity of the king, and to prophesy Ahab's destruction (I Kings 21).

Isaiah placed the blame on the princes and elders when the poor were plundered, the innocent were declared guilty, and the guilty were allowed to go free. He excoriated the false prophets.

"Therefore the Lord will cut off from Israel head and tail, branch and rush, in one day. The ancient and honorable, he is the head; and the prophet that teacheth lies, he is the tail. For the leaders of this people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyed" (Isaiah 9:14-16).

Priests and prophets who were getting drunk on alcoholic beverages were exposed without pity and condemned without reservation (Isaiah 28:7).

Micah preached against the same evils which Isaiah deplored. He was unrestrained in condemnation of hypocritical priests and false prophets for their abuse of their offices, for their flattery of the rich, and for their time-serving cry of peace when there was no peace (Micah 3:5-7).

Malachi's quarrel with the priests was that they corrupted the worship of GOD by offering blemished sacrifices, which were an insult to deity (Malachi 1 :8-14). He thought the Temple had better be closed than to dishonor GOD before all the people, as they were doing.

The condemnation of unworthy leaders by the Old Testament prophets is a delicate and dangerous standard to follow, but it involves a sacred duty. It may lead to a fate like that suffered by John the Baptist when he condemned Herod and Herodias for their horrible example of illicit marriage. However, it may merit the praise of the Saviour, such as he gave John after he had been beheaded.

Accent the Positive

One excellent way to protest against social sins is to preach and practice positive social righteousness. The Kingdom of GOD is a positive social concept; Christianity is positively social in its outreach; Christian churches have been the Good Samaritan to the world in many ways.

Christianity has been the fountain source of such healing streams as hospitals, orphanages, mental institutions, homes for the aged and for the incurables, care for unwed mothers, settlement houses in the slums for the underprivileged, charity to the poor, Christian schools and colleges, and the world-wide foreign missionary movement.

With prophetic zeal like the godly men of old, Christian leaders have fought, and must continue to fight, such social sins as slavery, dueling, liquor, narcotics, prostitution, adultery, child labor, pornographic literature, race prejudice, divorce, and war.

FOR BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What two great Old Testament commandments did JESUS quote, revealing both the personal and social aspects of the Gospel? What one word includes it all? (Matthew 22:35-40).
2. What are some of the great social contributions made to the world exclusively by Christianity?
3. How rich does a Christian have a moral right to become? What Bible principle is the antidote for materialism?
4. What are the ten greatest and most dangerous social sins which are generally prevalent in America? How can Christians combat them?

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