

TRUTH TELLERS

Amos was a truth teller.

He was one of several truth tellers that God sent to warn His people of the terrible price they would one day pay for their sins.

They were called prophets and the truth that God had sent them to proclaim was that if they continued to ignore his laws and worship like pagans He would send down His wrath upon them.

The prophets were not popular in Israel because they were telling people what they DIDN'T want to hear.

They were like us: we say we want people to tell us the truth, but when they do we don't like it and we don't like them for doing it.

The prophets were scorned, mocked, manhandled and even murdered.

But in spite of it all they set their face like flint and told the truth to God's people whether they wanted to hear it or not.

The first prophet was Moses.

Through Moses, God gave the Israelites a book called the *Torah*.

The *Torah* had three parts.

The first part was the moral law (the Ten Commandments) which explained the difference between right and wrong.

The second part was the civil law, which taught them how to organize and govern their society.

The third part was the ceremonial law, which showed them how they could receive forgiveness when they transgressed the moral and civil law.

But far from being grateful for the gift of the *Torah*, the Israelites were infuriated by it.

They showed their displeasure by immediately breaking its first and greatest command: "*I am the Lord your God: you shall have no other gods before me.*"

They constructed a pagan idol—a golden calf—and worshipped it by indulging in a pagan orgy.

Thus began a thousand years of lawlessness and pagan worship in Israel.

God's laws and instructions were like a red flag to a bull as far as the Israelites were concerned: they rebelled against everything He had commanded.

Pagan worship was offered in shrines that were raised up all over Israel to the gods of the Canaanites, the Edomites, the Amalekites and the Philistines.

The Israelites committed adultery, they murdered one another, they dishonored their parents and they sacrificed their children to pagan gods.

In short, they did everything God had forbidden them to do and they refused to do the things He had instructed them to do.

And they did it all in spite of the clear warning Moses had given them before he died: *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.”* (Deut. 30:15-18)

God continued to send prophets to warn them what the consequences of their disobedience would be.

Through the prophet Samuel He warned them: *“...if you do not obey the Lord, and if you rebel against his commands, his hand will be against you....”*

Through Isaiah He said: *“All day long I have held out my hands to an obstinate people, who walk in ways not good...Such people are smoke in my nostrils...I will destine you for the sword, and you will all bend down for the slaughter.”*

Through Jeremiah He admonished them: *“[Since] they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods...and...have burned sacrifices in it to gods that neither they nor their fathers nor the kings of Judah ever knew...I will devastate this city and make it an object of scorn.”*

Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Amos, Joel, Obadaiah, Jonah, Micah—God sent prophet after prophet to warn the Israelites of the disaster they were courting if they kept breaking His commands and worshipping pagan gods.

But the Israelites didn't want to hear the truth; they preferred to be comforted with pleasant lies.

And there were always false prophets around to tell them what their itching ears wanted to hear.

Finally, God's wrath boiled over and disaster fell upon them.

The Babylonians invaded Judea, breached the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, slaughtered most of the people and hauled the rest off to Babylon as prisoners of war.

After Cyrus of Persia released the Israelites from their Babylonian captivity, the Greeks came and tried to wipe Judaism off the face of the map.

They almost succeeded.

the Babylonian empire fell the Greeks came and tried to eradicate Judaism.

After the Greeks came the Romans who placed Israel under military law.

The Israelites paid a steep penalty for turning away from God.

Finally God sent the ultimate Truth Teller: the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Like the prophets who had preceded Him, Jesus gave the Israelites a stern dose of the truth.

In his first recorded sermon he told them: *"...anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed*

adultery with her and anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.”

If the Israelites had hoped for a more lenient prophet than the ones they were used to, they were in for a big disappointment.

This was new and stronger medicine than they had ever received before.

What Jesus was saying was that the Ten Commandments not only applied to what the things that they said and did, **but to the things that they thought as well!**

The flash of inner anger, the private lustful thought—these were as bad in God’s eyes as outright murder or fornication.

To drive the point home, Jesus added: *“If your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away....If your right hand causes you to sin, chop it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.”*

This was ruthless logic: God searches our hearts; our hearts are full of sin; the wages of sin is death; **so we all must all die.**

If the people hadn’t liked what prophets like Amos had to say, they liked what Jesus had to say even less.

Sure, he offered salvation, but only if they admitted that they were totally depraved and incapable of helping themselves.

Instead of telling them that they had better pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, Jesus declared to them that they were hopelessly lost in their sins and couldn't do anything to save themselves.

This was a truth that few could bear.

So it's not surprising that they treated this Truth Teller even worse than the ones who had preceded him.

It's hard to admit that we are totally corrupt and lost in our sins.

We like to think of ourselves as having at least **some** good in us.

Our pride will hardly allow us to think anything less.

Yet one can search the Scriptures in vain for confirmation that there is natural goodness in a man.

God's judgment is unequivocal: *“Every inclination of the thoughts of [man's] heart is only evil all the time.”*

“There is none that does good, not even one.”

These were not new truths; they went all the way back to *Genesis* and the flood.

From the very beginning the Israelites had never accepted this verdict about themselves.

So when Jesus reminded them of it, they killed him.

They hated the truth—just like we hate the truth.

Inside we are a moral disgrace and what we need is to have our *insides* cleaned up.

Oh we try to do the job ourselves!—to clean ourselves up.

We swear off lying, or gossiping, or thinking lustful thoughts or losing our temper—and we can make a pretty good go of it for awhile.

But sooner or later the inside rot breaks out and the old habits return and we’re right back where we started.

We are, Paul says, like whitewashed tombs: attractive on the outside but full of decay and death inside.

But however hard we try, we can’t get rid of the sin that lurks at the core of our being.

Just the other day I was teaching a Bible class in a nursing home.

I was going about my work in good spirits, feeling like God was in His heaven and all was right with the world.

As was leaving the nursing home I realized that I was smiling and I asked myself, "*Why does it make me feel good to do this?*"

Was it simply because I was privileged to be the instrument of God's grace, someone He used to bring comfort to people who were hurting?

Was it simply the good I was accomplishing that made me smile?

Well, yes, there was some of that.

But right behind that good thought, another thought *slithered* out of the recesses of my mind: that the people I had just visited probably appreciated my visiting.

And that led to my thinking that they might well tell other people at the nursing home how nice I was to visit them.

And then the people they were telling this to would think that I was a real nice guy and—who knew where it all might lead?

I might end up with everybody thinking I was the nicest guy in the world!

Wouldn't that be swell!

So it wasn't only God I was trying to glorify: it was ME as well!

And that smile on my lips probably had as much to do with the good I figured was EARNING as it did with the good I was DOING.

See how it works?

Paul wrote: *“When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.”*

Vanity may not seem evil, but don't you believe it!

Vanity is self-glorification, and when we're busy glorifying ourselves, we are not glorifying God.

We're just putting another coat of whitewash on the tomb when what we need to do is open up the tomb so that God can clean it out.

And the only way to do that is to face the fact that we are a total mess and then ask God to clean us up.

The first time Karen and I walked into a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church—Luther Memorial Chapel in Shorewood, Wisconsin—we picked up the red hymnal and along with everyone else read aloud the words of confession on page sixteen.

“Almighty God, our Maker and Redeemer, we poor sinners confess unto Thee that we are by nature sinful and unclean and that we have sinned against Thee by thought, word and deed. Wherefore we flee for refuge to Thine infinite mercy, seeking and imploring Thy grace for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

I turned to Karen and said, *“Honey, this is it! I can get behind every word in that confession!”*

I felt like the tax collector who couldn’t even look up to heaven but could only pray: *“Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner.”*

And I remembered that our Lord said of that man that he went home justified.

Can it really be that easy?

Yes it can, if you can bring yourself to face the truth about ***who you really are.***

You can't do it alone, but God has sent the Holy Spirit to live in you to help you do it.

And if you ask Him to, He will.

Of course there is shame in the process.

Of course there is guilt and pain.

But far outweighing all of the shame and the guilt and the pain is the freedom you will find when you face the truth.

The sin that remains buried and unconfessed in the whitewashed tomb of pride moulders and rots.

We are all as sick as our secrets,\.

But the sin that we face and confess to ourselves and to God is gone with the wind.

With the help of the Holy Spirit of God, we can all be truth tellers, and we can begin by telling the truth to ourselves.

Amen.

