

# HOW THE “HAVES” TREAT THE “HAVE-NOTS”

by Bill Martin

## KEY VERSE:

Amos 2:6-7a NRSV. Thus says the Lord; for three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals— they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way.

## FAITH STORY:

Amos 2:6-8 NRSV

## FAITH FOCUS:

In this passage we see Amos prophesying to Israel about God’s dissatisfaction with them. One of the issues facing the Israelites was the way that the rich were treating the poor. A major trade route passed through Israel, and this flow of goods and money allowed for a wealthy merchant class to form. This wealthy group of people was taking advantage of the poor—they were taking their land from them and turning the poor into serfs. God called Amos, a herdsman and shepherd, to prophesy to Israel about how displeased God was with their treatment of the poor.

## SESSION GOAL:

To help students see that God is very concerned about how people who are poor are treated.

## SESSION OBJECTIVES:

Students will be able to locate at least three places in the Bible where it talks about how to treat people who are poor.

## MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Set up chairs so that 1/4 is on one side of the room and 3/4 is on the other side.
- 2 Donuts or another snack (enough for the whole class)
- 3 Bibles for each student
- 4 Write scripture passages in Explore the Bible on newsprint or dry erase board.
- 5 Newsprint and markers

## SESSION OUTLINE

### FOCUS: (5–10 minutes)

You will have the room divided up into two distinct sides when students arrive. Make sure the class remains divided that way when all of the students are in place. Bring out the snack and set the food in front of the students in the ¼ “Have” side of the room. Before letting them eat, ask the ¾ side (“Have Nots”) what they think about just a small part of the class getting the snack. Ask one of the “Have-Not” students to stand up and say what’s wrong with that

situation, and after the student is done speaking, allow them to join the “Haves.” Then ask him/her if they feel any different about the situation now that they are part of the “Haves.”

**CONNECT: (5–10 minutes)**

Allow all students to enjoy the snack. **While they are eating, discuss:**

- 1 How did you feel about being a “Have” or a “Have-not”?
- 2 How does being one or the other change how you might look at things?

**Transition Statement:** *Let’s take a look at what God says about how the “have” people in the world should relate to the “have nots.”*

**EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (20–25 minutes)**

Give a short talk about the book of Amos, based on the information found in the Insights from Scripture.

**Cover these points:**

- Amos is prophesying to Israel about how God is displeased with their neighbors. He prophesies against Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammonites, Moab, and Judah, before he talks about Israel.
- As Amos condemns their neighbors, the crowd of Israelites probably cheered—especially when he gets to Judah, and Amos declares with a thundering voice: “Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Judah, and maybe four, I will not revoke my punishment...” Israel is thinking that everyone else has made the Lord angry, but they have no idea what Amos’ next words will be.
- Imagine how their jaws must have dropped when Amos says the Lord is displeased with them too.
- One of the main reasons for God’s displeasure with Israel, is the way that the wealthy are mistreating the poor.

**Ask students to choose which of the following groups they want to be in:**

- “I want to be active” group
- “I want to be creative” group
- “I just want to talk” group

**Form groups, then give these options to the groups:**

- **Active group:** Look up the scripture passages and come up with a skit that sums up how God wants us to relate to people who are poor. Optional: do this as a pantomime, without words.
- **Creative group:** Look up the scripture passages and come up with a cartoon, illustration, poem, or song that sums up how God wants us to relate to those who are poor.
- **Talk group:** Look up the scripture passages and come up with a list of ten things you think your class or church could do in relationship to those who are poor in your community and the world. Write this list on newsprint.

**Ask groups to share their results with the class.**

**Scriptures to look at:**

- James 2: 1-13
- Deut. 15:7
- Psalm 82:3, 41:1
- Proverbs 14:21, 19:17, 21:13, 28:8, 28:27, 29:14,
- Jeremiah 22:16
- Matthew 19:21

**APPLY: (5–10 minutes)**

Look at the list of options that the “Talk” group came up with. Discuss which activities the class would be interested in doing, and choose one or two that you will plan to do. Invite the congregation to join your class in this activity.

**RESPOND: (5 minutes)**

**Ask students to close their eyes for a few minutes and think about these questions:**

*Are you a “Have” or a “Have not”? How does it feel to be in that position?*

*If a prophet from God had a message for you on this topic, what would it be?*

*Close with a prayer.*

**INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:**

It would be helpful for the teacher to read Amos 1 & 2, and the introduction to Amos from a study Bible.

**Background to this prophecy from Amos:**

In 1 Kings 12: 1-16 the people of the northern tribes of Israel were asking Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, to lighten the burden that Solomon had placed on them when he was king. Rehoboam refused their request, and the North seceded from the South, making Jeroboam their king. This resulted in two kingdoms, Israel to the north and Judah to the south. The forced labor of Solomon and his heavy taxation was more than the northern tribes could stand. The irony of the situation is that the North was willing to fight to be free from tyranny, but in only 130-150 years they were being condemned for the same thing. Also, only 200 years from the time of their rebellion from the South, they were overtaken by Assyria because of their unfaithfulness to God. Their tyranny over the poor was a major factor in their unfaithfulness. The wealthy of Israel were making serfs out of the poor. They were taking over the land owned by the poor and then holding them in this impoverished state of servitude. The priests would not speak out against this injustice because they were enjoying the large offerings that were being given by the wealthy. So God sent Amos, a herdsman, to set Israel straight. Amos 2 verse 6b, states they are selling the “ righteous for silver, and the needy for sandals”—this may be referring to this serfdom, or it might be buying and selling the poor as slaves. In either case, the wealthy were misusing their power, and gaining greater wealth at the expense of the poor. Verse 8 mentions “lying at alters with garments taken in pledge.”

In those days, if someone owed you money, you took their garment as a pledge that they would pay you back. This verse says that not only are they worshiping other gods, but they are flaunting in public things that they had taken from the poor. To make matters worse, they drink wine bought with money from fines—this verse suggests that they were taking the poor to court when they could not pay. This abuse of power only put the poor deeper in debt to the rich.

In verse 7, Amos condemns both a sexual sin and the mistreatment of the poor in one breath. In that one verse, we read about the poor being pushed out of the way, and father and son sleeping with the same women. Israel was being condemned for both sexual depravity and for their mistreatment of the poor. According to Amos, there was no difference in the two, for God despised both.

There were other issues besides sexual misconduct and the treatment of the poor plaguing Israel. In 2 Kings 17 we have an account of the last king of Israel, Hoshea. During his reign they sinned against the Lord by worshiping other gods; they walked in the customs of other nations whom the Lord had driven out; they set up sacred pillars and wooden poles (poles were in honor of the Canaanite goddess Asherah); they served idols; they made their children pass through fire (child sacrifices to other gods); they used divination and augury, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord. All this was going on and yet it says in verse 2 that the evil Hoshea did was not to the extent that his ancestors did evil. If you read the books of 1&2 Kings, you will see how Israel's unfaithfulness was a continual problem. You will also see how patient and loving God was to them.

It is important for us to recognize both sides of God's disapproval with Israel. We can easily look at 2 Kings and only focus on Israel's adultery and idolatry. It is equally important to focus on the book of Amos, and how the poor were mistreated. This might be something that we are tempted to gloss over, but many other passages speak to our relationship to those who are poor, and it is necessary to give attention to this issue, especially in our materialistic world.

#### **WORKS CITED:**

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