

You Lack One Thing

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Pastor Scott Austin

artisanchurch.com

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Today I want to start by reading a sentence, a famous sentence, and I'll take a little poll after I read it of how many of you have heard that sentence before. And then, how many of you can remember where you heard it. So here's the sentence: "We are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Okay, so first poll; how many of you find that sentence familiar in one way or another? Lots of hands. How many remember who said it (just shout it out)? Martin Luther King said this. It's in his famous "I Have A Dream" speech. It's not the most famous line in the speech but it's one of the famous lines in the speech. August 28, 1963, fifty five years ago and so many of you remember it like it was yesterday [chuckle]. Now those words reverberate even for those of us who are much too young to have been alive when the speech was given. But of course the phrase, "Justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," that part of the speech was not original to Dr King. Martin Luther King Jr. was a preacher and he knew his Bible, and that phrase comes from the Bible. Actually there are several phrases in that speech that come from Scripture. This particular one comes from one of the prophets of Israel, from the prophet Amos. Amos 5:24 to be exact. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." It's a moving verse, it's a powerful image. It becomes is something of a prayer even as you read it, doesn't it. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." A verse like this might make you want to investigate and go a little bit deeper into the scriptures. Do you ever have this experience when you read an inspiring verse where you just just drawn in to know where it came from in the Bible, and what's around it? If if that doesn't happen for you let me encourage you the next time you feel inspired by a verse of Scripture, to go inspect it a little bit more closely.

I think of studying the Bible a little bit like looking at a famous work of art. Or maybe a little bit like a scientific observation. I know we have a lot of artsy people at Artisan and a lot of science-y people at Artisan and and we even have a few of those blessed people who are both, which I think is really awesome. But I use both of those because I think it applies no matter

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which framework you are more accustomed to. So pick the one you like, if you would rather think of yourself in the Museum of Modern Art looking at Van Gogh's "Starry Night" or whether you'd rather think of yourself in a science lab. Either way, you can sort of treat the scriptures this way. And the interesting thing is that some things you can see better when you're up close, right? So in the case of studying a painting, you can see the artist's brushstrokes and that tells you something about their technique that you wouldn't have gotten at a distance. Or in a lab, you might come closer through a microscope or something and see the cellular structure of an organism, learn more about it in that way. But other things are better perceived at a distance, aren't they? When you're up close looking at the brush strokes of the painting you can't see the totality of the composition. You can't see everything that's in it and how this object interplays with that object, and how the artist brilliantly composed this in that particular way. And if you're looking at the cellular structure of an organism in a lab, you can't see how that organism interacts with its environment exactly as well as you could at a distance. So sometimes you need a microscope and sometimes you need binoculars or a telescope. The same thing is true when you study Scripture.

So if we started by zooming in closer on this verse, here's one thing we'd find. The verse Amos 5:24 doesn't actually start with the word "let." It starts with a different little word. You may know what it is, it's the word "but." I'll refrain from making my middle schooler joke except to say that this word is a little word that has an important function in grammar. "But" is sort of like a linguistic hinge that takes us from one idea and swings us to another idea. Do you see how that's the case? In this verse 5:24 we know what we're swinging to. We're swinging to the idea of justice rolling down like waters and righteousness being like an ever flowing stream, a mighty gush of water that is justice. That's what we swing to but what what are we? What's the other end of the hinge? What are we swinging from? And that's the kind of thing that you start to look for when you get close to Scripture, it's like the brush strokes. And so if you want to see where it's swinging from you have to back away from the painting a little bit. You have to get out from behind the microscope and maybe look at the organism in its environment. And here's what happens when you look at this particular verse in its environment. You would come across this delightful little stanza of prophetic poetry, deeply inspiring and encouraging to us all. This is the Lord speaking through the prophet Amos right before this famous verse that Dr King quoted. "God says, 'I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings I will not accept them. And the offerings of well being of your fatted animals I will not look upon.'" Now, none of that applies to us. That's not how we worship God today, but then God goes on to say, "Take away from me the noise of your songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But" (meaning "instead") "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing

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stream.” Wow. At some remove from the verse, when we back away from it and see it in its surroundings, that verse which we thought was so inspiring and as a prayer turns out to be God speaking to us saying you've never known a love like mine. That's a really pretty song. It sounds like noise to me. I don't want it, take it back unless you're going to let justice roll down like waters in your community.

You see how that becomes a little bit unsettling. And it's also I think how we get to Dr King's vision for the world, which is, I believe, God's vision for the world. By the way, I want to go just one more layer in this little experiment of looking at the scriptures and then I promise I'll start my sermon [laughter]. Because this verse from the “I Have A Dream” speech from Amos 5:24 is actually from the same chapter that was assigned to us by the lectionary for the Hebrew Bible reading for this week. And the reading that the lectionary gives us from Amos chapter five comes before this verse, which comes before that stanza of really difficult to hear prophetic language from God. And so I want to look at that text with you for a minute, and again this is from Amos. If you want to turn to this in your Bibles you can follow along ,or if you just prefer to listen you can do that as well. The lectionary gives us verses six and seven and then verses ten through fifteen (it's not that verses eight and nine aren't any good, it's just that they get skipped by the lectionary so that's how I'll do it today): “Seek the Lord and live or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire and will devour Bethel with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood and bring righteousness to the ground,” skipping to verse ten, “They hate the one who reproves in the gate and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levees of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone but you shall not live in them. You have planted pleasant vineyards but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions and how great are your sins, you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe and push aside the needy in the gate. Therefore, the prudent will keep silent and such a time, for it is an evil time. Seek good and not evil that you may live. And so the Lord the God of hosts will be with you just as you have said. Hate evil and love good and establish justice in the gate. It may be that the Lord the God of hosts will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.”

Now, if you are feeling that that reading of the text actually brings up more questions than it provides answers, know that you are not alone in feeling that way. What is the house of Joseph? Where is Bethel and why is it going to be destroyed, maybe? What is Wormwood? It's an English word but I'm not actually sure what that is, and what does it have to do with justice? That's a less clear metaphor than water rolling down. I get that the water one but I don't know what wormwood has to do with it. Who are the people who are called the remnant of Joseph? That sounds like a sci fi novel. And all these questions that might crop up if you read a passage of Scripture like this, and I'm not going to answer any of them [laughter]. Yet. But I want to

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encourage you — and I'm giving you a lot of kind of meta-Scripture stuff today, and I like to do it sometimes but don't encourage you the same way that my tenth grade English teacher encouraged his class when we started to read Shakespeare. Remember when you read Shakespeare for the first time? You were like, "I thought this was English class!" [Laughter]. What Mr Rhys told all of us was that you just need to keep going and keep reading, better yet, keep hearing it. Let somebody else read it out loud. Don't ask them to stop when you're confused. Go see the play performed. Don't interrupt the cast and ask them to explain what the words mean. They're different, but here's the weird thing that happens, and I promise this happens. If you just kind of let it go for a few minutes, you begin to understand it. Some — you don't get it one hundred percent but you get a lot more than you thought you would. Ever have that experience with Shakespeare? You can have that experience with Scripture as well. You just plow through all that "house of Joseph" and "wormwood" and just keep going. Just keep at it. And you won't get everything, but you'll get more than you thought. If you give up right away the first time you come to a "thou" or a "thee" in Shakespeare or in the King James Bible then you're not going to have much luck. Hopefully, even in the midst of all that confusing language, one thing was quite plain. It sort of like stood out; it leapt up off the page: "Because you trample on the poor, everything you are planning to do with your wealth is going to fail. " Did you catch that part of the message? Fancy houses, pleasant vineyards; you don't get to enjoy any of it because you trample on the poor. And that in my view is the kind of context that's the environment for the organism that is Amos 5:24, which eventually makes its way into the "I Have A Dream" speech. It's this trampling of the poor that's happening in the community of God's people and God is not going to have any more of it. And that's what sets up the verse that we are familiar with.

So, let me just say this. If you are intrigued by this kind of step by step unfurling of meaning in the Scripture. If you're intrigued by this idea of zooming in and then zooming out and zooming back in and doing that kind of work with Scripture. And I know some of you are like, "Oh my goodness I just want to watch football." [Laughter] Nothing wrong with that at all! But if you are intrigued by that, I want to encourage you to come tonight to our second Sunday's gathering. It happens right here in this room, 6-8 p.m. and this is the kind of thing we're going to do. We're going to go a little deeper. In fact, I think probably tonight we'll go a little bit deeper in Amos chapter five and some of those questions that came up from the lectionary passage we will address. I don't know if I'll give you a perfect answer for them, but we'll give you some ways to find the answers and to apply them. Because again it's not just a question of like what does the "remnant of Joseph" mean, it's once you know what that means what does that mean for me? It is not strictly an academic exercise, it's a personal spiritual formation exercise. So 6-8 p.m. tonight. Unlike some versions of Bible study and spiritual formation in

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large groups that we've done in the past, we are not offering childcare for this and we're not doing a potluck beforehand. We hope that many and perhaps most of you will still be able to be part of this and we're open to feedback on that kind of stuff if you want to provide it. It is entirely open to novices. I've gotten some feedback over the last summer months that people want to know how to read the Bible. How do you know how to read the Bible? This is what it's for, this is for you if you're in that group. It's also for you if you feel like you do know but want to go a little deeper. Okay, commercial time over. Are you ready for my sermon? [Laughter] "Is he serious? I thought he was done!"

What I want to do in just a few minutes that we have left is to look at a story from the Gospel of Mark. I want to look at a teaching of Jesus. It's Mark 10:17-31. In the red Bibles it would be page 822 if you want to find it there, or if you open the Artisan Church app and swipe over from the left you can find the Bible tab and just search for Mark 10:17 and it will come up. You can scroll through and find it from there. That's a slightly different translation but it's the same text. So Jesus, keep in mind, was a prophet in the tradition of the prophets of Israel (the Jewish prophets). Jesus was a prophet in the tradition of Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. And so you're gonna hear him saying a lot of the same things that they said. And I really believe if you start to think of Jesus in that way — now Jesus is much more than a prophet, not exactly like those prophets of Israel were. But if we remove Jesus from that context, I think we miss part of what he has to say. If you think of Jesus as a prophet like Amos, it will change the way you hear his words. So, Mark chapter ten verses seventeen through thirty one. "As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments; You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother. He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus looking at him loved him and said..." I just have to pause there. Jesus looked at him and loved him. What he was about to say to him might have made the man feel like Jesus didn't love him, but Jesus looked at him and loved him, and said this: "You lack one thing. Go sell what you own and give the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come follow me. When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving for he had many possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.' And the disciples were perplexed at these words, but Jesus said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals, it is impossible, but not for God. For God all things are possible.'

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Peter began to say to him —” Peter is always the one who says something. He always has a response. “‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive one hundred fold. Now in this age, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields with persecutions. And in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last and the last will be first.’” Did you know that context of that verse, which you've heard so many times, “The last will be first and the first will be last” in this telling is spoken to someone who already gets the first level of what Jesus is teaching? Jesus is saying congratulations, you get it, you're ahead the game, but keep in mind that those who are first will be last and the last will be first.

We are not getting any encouragement this morning, are we? [Laughter]. Now I've been in church (some of you have as well) to hear this story preached on a dozen or two times. And I think that usually we preachers miss the mark in one of two ways. The first way that we miss the mark is to say it's not really about money. It's about whatever you can't let go of. Now that is entirely possible, maybe that's true. Maybe you haven't got a dollar to your name but you are clinging tightly to a relationship, or a job, or a housing situation, or a friendship — whatever it might be. But I think that maybe we just ought to first examine our way of life and recognize that on the whole, we are enormously wealthy, both on a global scale and on a historical scale. We have many possessions as it were. And maybe we ought to start there with the plain meaning, with the basic meaning, the first meaning for the man and say, Whoa, how much of my stuff is keeping me from the kingdom of God? So that's the first mistake. The second mistake, and I think this one is usually made by people who are with me with what I just said, is to say that therefore everyone should do exactly what Jesus told the rich man to do; sell everything, give it all away [and] basically take a vow of poverty. And again, maybe I wouldn't necessarily rule that out. God may speak to you with such a dramatic and drastic instruction. But the risk there is this: most people are not actually called to vocational poverty. You know that phrase? Most people are not actually called to sell everything that they have and make their whole life dedicated to the absence of possessions. Some people are. They're called monks or nuns, or mystics. They give us a great gift to the church. But the problem is if you are not called to that drastic vocational poverty, and someone says to you that's the only response to this particular teaching of Jesus, guess what you're going to do? Nothing. You're going to do nothing because that's not for you, and that's the only way to respond. So, hmmm, I'm probably okay with my seven guitars (as an example that someone might have) [Laughter]. A couple of them are on Craigslist, I promise. So you see it's the difference between a diagnosis and a prescription. I think almost all of us should be open to the diagnosis that Jesus gave the rich man, which is [that] your possessions are preventing you from being close to God and from

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following me. I think almost everybody in the room can probably find a way that that's true. His particular prescription for this man who was very wealthy and was so bound up in it, might not be the one that he has for you. But that doesn't mean there isn't a treatment that he's going to prescribe. And I want to say one last thing about the teaching of Jesus because I found it incredibly fascinating. Did you notice what he said to the man after all of the talk about following the commandments? The man said, "Teacher, I've done all of that" and he said, "You *lack* one thing." This man lacked nothing. This man had everything — every advantage, every possession, every wealth, every food, every servant, and Jesus identified that state of being as "You lack one thing, you have too many things." Jesus is really good at that. He was good at it then and he's good at it today. He seems really adept at finding the one thing that you want so desperately to cling to and tell you to let go of it. And he will love you before he says it and he will love you when you do it, and he will love you if you walk away sad because you just can't, at least not yet. So my question for you that I want you to ask yourself maybe as you come to take communion or even if you just sort of stay in your space and think or meditate on this, what one thing the you lack? By which I mean, what one thing do you have too much of? It might be money or possessions. Really, I do think that all almost all of us suffer from having too much. But I'm open to the possibility that for you, it might be something else. Regardless, I think that the lesson Jesus wants us to learn is that the only way to gain what we need is to surrender what we have.

So let's pray together and then we'll take communion. Lord Jesus, we hear these hard words spoken to a man at ease who then became a man ill at ease. What words do you have for us today as we approach your table of grace, knowing that nothing we do can make you love us any more or less. But that some things we can do in obedience to your call will draw us closer to you and will bring the kingdom of God closer to all of us. Help us to see those things, to know them for what they are, to respond with accord and courage, and to reap the eternal benefits, the spiritual benefits that you have promised. We pray these things in your name, amen. Our communion table is open to all who are seeking to follow Jesus in this place. Come and take a piece of the bread, remember Christ's body broken for you, dip it in one of the cups remembering his blood which is shed for the forgiveness of sins. And as the band comes and leads us in another song, you can take that right at the table and then return to your seats. You can come up single file and then go out through the aisles on the ends. There will be a member of the prayer team at the back of the room. If you'd like to receive prayer during this time please go visit with that person. And however you might respond, even if it's just as I said, sitting and thinking for a few minutes, trust that the Spirit is there with you in that response. Amen.

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[end of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information visit us at ArtisanChurch.com