The Process

THESE RESOURCES ARE PRIMARILY FOR GROUP LEADERS. You may select study segments based on your particular setting and the time you have available. If you are working with a younger group, it may be better to conduct the activity at the beginning of your session. Other groups may focus better using a video clip or imagining themselves as part of the real-life story. Older groups may be less engaged by the illustrations and activities and prefer to skip straight to the Bible Study and Going Deeper materials. We hope that these resources are helpful to you in investigating these challenging issues. Feel free to copy any of the material that would be useful as handouts for your group.

Historical Background and the Person of Amos

AMOS WAS A PROPHET TO THE NORTHERN KINGDOM of Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (c. 786 – 746 B.C.), which makes him one of the earliest prophets to which an entire biblical book is devoted. “Amos” literally means “burden” or “burden bearer,” which provides an interesting metaphor of his prophetic message. He seems to have grown up in rural areas and, unlike other prophets, had no prior association with the religious or political structures of the day.
Israel at the time of Amos was enjoying an almost unparalleled period of prosperity. The ancient Near East was in a power vacuum and there were no great nations pressuring Israel. Consequently Israel, and Judah to the south, were able to expand their borders almost back to those of Solomon’s era. On the surface, everything appeared to be going well. There was wealth and political stability, and religious activity appeared to be at an all-time high. But the prophets of this era were not so impressed. They lamented the decay at the heart of Israelite society, and painted a verbal picture of great social injustice, personal immorality, and spiritual dysfunction.

The Point

AMOS’S PROPHETIC MESSAGE TO ISRAEL focused on two chief concerns – justice and righteousness. Because the ancient Israelites knew no difference between sacred and secular, justice and righteousness were seen as two sides of the same coin. They are also very practical terms – that is to say, you can’t be right or just without practicing justice and righteousness.

Getting Started

JUSTICE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS are not solely spiritual issues before God, but tangible, physical issues before people. Discuss the following story.

A little boy broke the glass of a streetlamp. Conscious of his wrongdoing, he went to his father and asked, “What shall I do?” “Do?” replied his father. “Why, we must report it and ask what you must pay, then go and settle it.” Whimpered the boy, “I thought all I had to do was ask God to forgive me!”

Illustrating the Point

MOVIE: A TIME TO KILL (DVD 0:55:04 – 1:02:35)
Sometimes issues of justice are not clear-cut, and getting involved means standing in solidarity with people you wouldn’t normally associate with. Carl Lee Hailey, a black man in southern Mississippi, took the law into his own hands in avenging the rape of his daughter. While one may question the morality of his actions, the U.S. justice system guarantees all a fair trial. Jake Brigance, a white lawyer, stood alongside Carl when no one else would. At great personal risk, he worked tirelessly to make sure the court reached a decision based on just law and not bigotry. This clip captures Jake’s final address to the jury.
(Note: This movie carries an R rating and the scene contains several harrowing moments that reflect upon the brutal ordeal suffered by the little girl.)

REAL LIFE: MICROFINANCE FOR THE POOR
Lim Ey emerged from Cambodia’s Pol Pot regime as a young man without an
education or skills to survive in the post-regime context. For years, Ey was forced into a discouraging cycle of borrowing rice from a grain buyer to run his noodle-making business, which earned him only a meager income to support his family. Ey struggled to repay his crippling debt until he applied for a microloan through VisionFund Cambodia. This and successive loans have provided him with opportunities to grow his business and live free from worry about family finances. World Vision’s microfinance projects in Cambodia focus on providing sustainable financial services to Cambodia’s rural population.

**Breaking Open the Word**

AMOS 5:1-17 IS A LONG POEM by Amos that he describes as a “lament” or a “funeral song.”

READ VERSES 1-6.

- How is Amos feeling about Israel?
- What has caused death in Israel?
- If Amos is lamenting over Israel, what does that say about the state of his own nation?

READ VERSE 7 AND THEN VERSES 10-13.

- How are justice and righteousness being cast aside?
- Whom does Amos seem to be accusing in this regard?
- What are some equivalent modern-day situations?

READ VERSES 4-6 AND THEN VERSES 14-15.

- What does Amos tell us to do?
- How does Amos say we can seek God?
- What are some ways to “establish justice at the gates” today?

Amos is greatly saddened by the state of Israel, and in his grief he utters this funeral song. As far as eulogies go, this one is not very complimentary. The post-mortem is that Israel stopped seeking God because they stopped doing justice and righteousness (even though they kept “worshiping” God. Worse still, some people who lived in situations of privilege (i.e., they owned vineyards, lived in houses of hewn stone, and could exact rent from tenants) were actively working against justice and righteousness, casting them aside and trampling them into the dust.

By focusing on “the gate,” Amos is zeroing in on the place where the ancient Israelites held negotiations, made contracts, and delivered legally binding judgments. This was the center for
the regulation and organization of day-to-day life. If things were going wrong here, then most of the patterns of economics, commerce, and politics were probably going wrong as well.

One way to think about “the gate” in modern terms is to consider where decisions are made and actions undertaken that affect day-to-day life. These decisions are to be characterized by justice and righteousness. There are the political “gates” of parliaments and local councils, and the economic “gates” of global agencies. There are also the private “gates” of corporate boardrooms and school PTAs. Schoolyard interactions and discussions across the neighbor’s fence are equally in view.

According to Amos, doing justice and righteousness is about seeking good, shunning evil, and bringing about life. Ultimately, when we seek good, we are seeking God.

When Amos encourages us to seek good and not evil, he is saying that, while not contributing to unjust situations and unrighteous acts is a good start, we need to go further. We need to proactively seek ways to bring about justice and righteousness in our neighborhoods and in our world.

In what ways could you be more proactive in seeking justice and righteousness?

Going Deeper: Justice and Righteousness in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, justice and righteousness are found in close association with each other (i.e., within the same verse or within adjacent verses) 67 times, 52 times as word-pairs. Four of these occurrences are in Amos (5:7, 12, 24; 6:12). In close association, justice and righteousness stand as metonyms (a word that denotes one thing but refers to a related thing) for the way God intended all of his creation to live. To put it another way, when Israel was established by God to be a holy nation, he intended Israel to be a society characterized by justice and righteousness. As such, justice and righteousness impact every aspect and level of society – they are not solely issues for multinational organizations and governments, but also for families, friends, and local communities.

In the following list of verses we can see the thread of justice and righteousness woven throughout the Old Testament. For each verse, identify:

Who the text is addressed to
What area of life justice and righteousness are being applied to
How this relates to our situation today
For example:

| Genesis 18:18 | Abraham | » Position of authority in relation to a large group of people (patriarch/leader)  
|              |        | » Father (parent figure)
|              |        | » Leaders are chosen by God to ensure justice and righteousness among the people over whom they have authority
|              |        | » Parents are charged with bringing up their children in a family marked by justice and righteousness

Deuteronomy 16:18-20

Psalm 72:1-2
See also:
1 Kings 10:6-9
2 Samuel 8:15

Proverbs 2:1-9

Proverbs 29:7

Psalm 106:3

Psalm 11:7
Psalm 33:5
Zephaniah 3:5

**Activity: Making a Difference – One Person at a Time**

**YOU WILL NEED:** Taper candles or candlelight-service-sized candles (one for each person), one large candle on a stand, tea candles, matches, and a room that can be darkened. Have the group stand in a circle and distribute the personal-sized candles. Place the large candle in the middle of the circle and scatter tea candles around the floor.

**ASK:** How is this darkened room like our world, local community, workplace, or school? (Some people are lost, don’t know which way to go for help, live in poverty, are treated unfairly, etc.)
SAY: The Bible often uses darkness as a metaphor to describe what happens when the world turns away from God’s intention for it (see, for example, Acts 25:15-18; Ephesians 5:8-11; 1 Peter 2:9-10). Jesus said that he is the light of the world (John 8:12) and that he came so that no one should have to live in darkness (John 12:46).

Go to the large candle in the center of the room and light it.

SAY: Take some time now to think of someone you know who is living in darkness. Then think about something you could simply and easily do tomorrow or the next day that would brighten their life. Then go to the candle in the center of the circle. The candle represents Christ. Light your candle and then go and light the candle of someone else, telling them about your person and your idea. If your candle is already lit and you think of someone to help, you don’t need to go to the center candle; just go and light another person’s candle, telling them about your person and your idea.

Allow the group time to circulate, lighting each other’s candles and telling each other their ideas.

ASK: How has the room changed? (It is much brighter, we can see each other’s faces, the light makes the room feel warmer.)

ASK: How long did it take before the room started to change? (Right away; it only changed a little at first but then it got brighter much faster.)

ASK: Was it hard to think of a person and a way to help them?

READ: Matthew 5:14-16

SAY: It only takes a few small candles to quickly brighten a dark place. Being a Christian gives you enormous potential to make a lasting difference in this world. It all begins with one person at a time.
Prayer Thoughts

» Thank God for all the people in the world who work to bring about justice and righteousness.

» Ask forgiveness for the times when you have contributed to injustice or unrighteousness.

» Ask God for help to live in ways that deal justly and rightly with others.

Adapted from resources created by World Vision Australia.

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About World Vision

WORLD VISION is a Christian humanitarian organization dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities worldwide to reach their full potential by tackling the causes of poverty and injustice. Motivated by our faith in Jesus Christ, World Vision serves alongside the poor and oppressed as a demonstration of God’s unconditional love for all people.

We envision a world where each child experiences “fullness of life” as described in John 10:10. We know this can be achieved only by addressing the problems of poverty and injustice in a holistic way. World Vision is unique in bringing 60 years of experience in three key areas to help children and families thrive: emergency relief, long-term development, and advocacy. We bring our skills across many areas of expertise to each community where we work, enabling us to support children’s physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

About World Vision Resources

ENDING GLOBAL POVERTY and injustice begins with education: understanding the magnitude and causes of poverty, its impact on human dignity, and our connection to those in need around the world.

World Vision Resources is the publishing ministry of World Vision. World Vision Resources educates Christians about global poverty, inspires them to respond, and equips them with innovative resources to make a difference in the world.