

Remedial instruction: Amos 8:1-12

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [July 13, 2010](#) issue

When a child is ignoring basic responsibilities, parents rely on a well-known parenting technique to make a point. Mom looks her ten-year-old in the eye while holding a toothpaste tube in one hand and the cap in the other. “This is called toothpaste,” she says, “and this is called a cap. They go together.”

Vince Lombardi used the same remedial method several times during his first year of coaching the Green Bay Packers. Team morale was abysmal in 1959. The “Pack” had won only one game the prior year. Most of the previous decade had been a losing proposition for the franchise. Then, during one summer practice of uninspiring play, Lombardi’s patience ran out. He blew his whistle and called the team together. Then he picked up the oblong pigskin. “Gentleman,” he said, “this is a football.” Packer wide receiver and jokester Max McGee is said to have replied, “Hey coach, not so fast. Not so fast.”

The Lord God is not beyond impatience and remedial instruction when people need a reminder about neglected responsibilities. God held a basket of ripened summer fruit beneath Amos’s nose and said, “Amos, what do you see here?” The prophet, sensing that God was serious, didn’t bother joking. “A basket of summer fruit,” he replied. With that brief exchange, strangely similar to a parent remedially instructing a child, the doors opened to a flood of divine wrath.

It may be helpful to imagine the fruit-basket conversation taking place in wintry months, a time of year when many of us enjoy luscious fruit picked by underpaid migrant workers half a world away. Delighting in juicy raspberries on one’s breakfast cereal in mid-December is a perfect commentary on personal wealth. If you live in North Dakota and you cannot spot your mailbox through the snow drifts, there is no way those fresh peaches on your ice cream came from Thelma’s garden up the street. A Latin American farmer who is eking out an existence picked that fruit for you.

There is sin among the wealthy elite in Israel, and it is rampant. On second thought, scratch the phrase “wealthy elite”—it excuses too many of us from God’s remedial

instruction. Anyone capable of making a profit, any entrepreneur or executive, any small business owner, any farmer with grain to sell, anyone with enough means or social placement to be feasting on sumptuous raspberries in December needs to sit up straight when listening to Amos 8. There is the presence of iniquity wherever people forget the weather-beaten hands that labored to produce those raspberries.

As a tyke in the third pew at church, I struggled during tedious parts of the Sunday liturgy. The confession of sin seemed interminable. Kneeling provided the perfect height for a kindergartner to put teeth marks into the pew back. I gnawed on the rounded oak while adults around me muttered: "I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto thee all my sins and iniquities." I had no idea what *iniquities* were, although they sounded bad.

Today I know a little more about iniquity through firsthand experience and some better linguistic understanding of the word. Change one letter in *iniquity* and you have *inequity*. Both have to do with being uneven, unequal or out of balance. Just as we tip over if the tiny fluid-filled canals in our inner ear malfunction, so our faith life tips out of kilter if we cannot find a way to deal honestly and fairly with those who have less than we do. Iniquity is the imbalance that comes from tipping the scales to favor our own needs at the expense of someone else.

The movers and shakers in Amos's time knew iniquity. They knew how to rig the scales and increase the counterweights when selling grain. They understood how to hide the rotten strawberries at the bottom of For Sale cartons. They knew how to dilute infant formula and sell it at the price of whole milk. They were masters at sweeping chaff from the floor and mixing it in with good wheat when no one was looking. In all of this, poor people were the victims. If they wanted to eat, they had little choice but to put up with uneven and dishonest selling practices.

Worst of all, the perpetrators in this culture of iniquity treated religion as an inconvenience. They talked a good game of faith but had little patience for its workings. Anytime one finds it irksome to have to set down the tools of the workplace in order to honor the sabbath, something is spiritually amiss. Superficial religion is at play. To chafe at the prospect of losing a single day's profits is to be so personally out of balance as to render the whole idea of faith ridiculous. It is to be dedicated to greed.

The Lord God's stern response to this corrupt state of affairs is to engage a deprivation that hurts more than the worst hunger. A verbal famine will strike the

land, and every guilty person will be unable to hear God speak. God's very words will dry up. Like a child forced to grow old without ever hearing a word of love from a parent, Israel will receive the silent treatment. God is *that* fed up. But hope can also be found in silence. Silence is not nothing, after all; it is something. It is a commanding expression that can help us face features in our lives we'd prefer to avoid. Silence may gain us some perspective on iniquity. It may even lend the urgency we need to rebalance those crooked societal scales we keep weighting in our favor.