

**AMOS: JUSTICE FOR ALL**  
**PLUMB**  
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Amos 7:7-9

If you travel to Italy you may very well visit the city of Pisa in order to visit one of Italy's great monuments—the famous Tower of Pisa. This magnificent tower is a freestanding bell tower built adjacent to the city's cathedral. The tower itself is circular. At its base, it has a diameter of 51 feet. Its height—well, that depends on which side you are measuring—the high side is 186 feet tall, and the lower side is 3 feet shorter. Because of this discrepancy, we know the tower more popularly as the Leaning Tower of Pisa.

So, why does the tower lean? The answer is that it was built on unevenly soft soil. If the soil were evenly soft, the tower would settle evenly and not lean. Unevenly soft caused the tower to tilt. What I find amazing is that they knew this as they were building the tower. As the tower rose, it began to lean. As they built higher, the tower leaned more. So, what did they do? They curved the tower upward to compensate for the tilt. Over the centuries, the leaning increased by fractions of an inch each year until the tower was in danger of toppling over.

Construction on the tower began in 1173. It took them five years to build the first four floors. Construction ceased for the next 100 years and then three more stories were added. Eighty years after that, the final floor with the bell tower was completed. That was in 1370.

Six-hundred years later (and six-hundred years of increased leaning), in 1990, the tower was closed to visitors and a massive renovation was undertaken. This renovation would last eleven years. A large part of what they did during this time was to stabilize the structure. Very carefully and slowly, soil was removed from under the high side to allow the tower resume its upright condition. This amazing feat of engineering was successful. Previous to the renovation, the tower leaned at an angle of 5.5 degrees. It now leans just 4 degrees. The engineers could have straightened the tower completely, but what tourist would want to visit the Perfectly Upright Tower of Pisa? So they left it leaning.

This summer, I have been preaching a series of sermons through the Old Testament book of Amos. We continue our journey today with a stop in chapter 7. In this chapter we encounter the powerful image of God holding a plumb line.

Now, a plumb line is an ancient construction tool that is still in use today. A plumb line is not complicated. It is just a weight on a string. It is used in the construction of things that are vertical—walls, buildings, towers. You use a plumb

line to ensure that what you are building is vertical—that it stands straight up. A structure that is not vertical—one that leans—is said to be “out of plumb.” If something is out of plumb, that can cause problems.

Today, if you were to hold a plumb line next to the Tower of Pisa, the tower would fail miserably because it is so far out of plumb.

The term plumb line (or a plumb bob) came about because the hanging weight was often made of the dense metal lead. The Latin word for lead is *plumbum*. This is the same word from which we get our word plumber.

In our reading for today, Amos has a vision of God standing next to a wall—a stone wall. We are told that this is *a wall built with a plumb line*. And God is holding a plumb line in his hand. It is not said, but the implication that I see is that God is the builder of this particular wall. It is a good wall and perfectly vertical. It doesn't lean to one side or the other. It is proof that God is an excellent builder.

In this vision, God asks Amos, *What do you see?* Amos, not one to let the obvious pass him by, answers, *I see a plumb line*.

The book of Amos contains the words of a man named Amos who lived in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. He was not a professional prophet, but a farmer and shepherd. He was sent by God from his home in Judah to go north to the kingdom of Israel and bring God's word to the people there.

In Israel, Amos delivered powerful and pointed critiques against Israel's social, political, and religious structures and institutions. He focuses on the social inequities which allowed the wealthy to live in luxury while the poor withered away. We have already heard his words, *Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils* (6:4-6). He addresses the people's religious life and is critical of their worship that fails to promote justice and righteousness. He condemns those who *have turned justice to poison* (6:12). In Israel, a few people have become wealthy at the expense of the poor. We would say that the equity gap was widening.

The bulk of Amos' preaching is concerned with the sins of the powerful. He indicts them saying, *You hate the one who calls for justice... [You] abhor the one that speaks the truth. You trample the poor. You afflict the righteous. You take bribes. You shove aside the needy.* (5:10-12 paraphrased)

But the heart of Amos' preaching can be found in his words that we know so well, those words that convey God's desire that *justice roll down like waters and righteousness [run] like and ever-flowing stream*.

For Amos, justice and righteousness are to be preferred over fancy worship, ostentatious offerings, grand songs, and heavenly harps. Living a righteous life is the highest form of worship. To live a righteous life is to live life “in plumb.”

After Amos identifies that plumb line in God’s hand, God speaks to Amos, with this message to Israel:

*Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel;  
I will spare them no longer.  
The high places of Isaac will be destroyed  
and the sanctuaries of Israel will be ruined;  
with my sword I will rise against the house of Jeroboam.*

The prophesy of Amos is that God will judge Israel. God will take that plumb line that he is holding and will set it in the middle of the people. Just as a mason uses a plumb to determine if a wall is vertical, God will use the line to measure the uprightness of his people. If the people are found to be ‘out of plumb,’ they will face God’s judgment. Their temples and shrines will be destroyed, and God will rise up against the people with a sword.

The question that Amos forces us to ask ourselves is this: What is our plumb line?

A plumb line keeps the thing you are building in right relationship with the world around it—perpendicular to the constant pull of gravity. A plumb line ensures that any wall or column is undeniably vertical, that they don’t end up looking like that leaning tower in Italy.

Imagine that your life is represented by a wall that you are building brick by brick. You have full control over where each brick will be set. What do you use as your plumb line?

Different people have different plumb lines. Some measure their lives with wealth. Others measure with power. For others it is fame. Some people ask, “Am I important?” or “Will I be remembered?” or “Am I happy?” That is their plumb line. That is how they choose to align themselves.

For the prophet Amos, God’s plumb line is justice and a belief in the Lord. He preached that this is how people are to measure their lives. They should be properly aligned with God’s call for justice and equity.

As people of God, our plumb line is the Word of God—the scriptures, the commandments, the words of the prophets such as Amos and Isaiah. Do we follow the commandments? Are we working for justice and righteousness, for compassion and forgiveness? Do we love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves? Do we seek to build a right relationship with God and our neighbor?

As people of faith, we recognize God to be a constant in our lives. God is our gravity. The German theologian Paul Tillich labeled God “The Ground of Being.” Our plumb lines should point directly toward God.

As Christians, we value the ministry of Amos, but our faith calls us farther. Our faith leads us to Jesus Christ who is our example in living and service. He is our plumb line. Remember his words: *I am the way, the truth, and the life*. For us, Christ is how we measure what is loving and compassionate and just. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians, *Live in love, as Christ loved us* (Eph 5:2).

Before I finish, I would like to give you some homework. I don’t do this often, but I ask that when we finish, that you take a moment and make a list of the plumb lines in your life—what do you use to measure who you are. Be honest. Don’t just put “Jesus” but include everything, including those things that maybe you aren’t so proud of. Then evaluate this list and use it to develop a new plumb line for yourself—a line that will make you right with God. Amen.