

“RESTORING OURSELVES TO GOD”

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A reading from the fifth Chapter of Lamentations (NIV translation), verses 19-22.

Lamentations 5:19-22 - You, O Lord, reign forever; your throne endures from generation to generation. Why do you always forget us? Why do you forsake us so long? Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may return; renew our days of old unless you have utterly rejected us and are angry with us beyond measure

A reading from the fourteenth Chapter of John (NIV translation), verses 15-21.

John 14: 15-21 - If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.

Heavenly Father I thank You for all the blessings You have given us. We live in a free community; we enjoy the right to have our voices heard, to insist that our government reflects Your standards of justice. We truly have the power to restore ourselves to You.

Father forgive us for our part in the terrible suffering in our state inflicted on the most vulnerable citizens among us. Forgive us for not using our voices and other resources to demand that Your standards of justice protect them.

Father help us love and believe in Your one and only son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who walked the earth and taught us how to act justly, to love mercy and how to walk humbly with You. Help us restore ourselves to You through the power of the Holy Spirit so that we will bring our community, part of Your kingdom on earth, closer to Your kingdom in heaven.

I make this prayer in Jesus' name, Amen.

Lamentations is an emotional eye witness account of the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. The author, tradition holds to be the Prophet Jeremiah, had faithfully preached the Word for 40 years and warned of Israel's destruction if the people continued to fail to get right with God. Jeremiah and many of the other Prophets (especially Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos and Micah) warned the People of Israel of pending judgement because they were violating God's standards of justice.

The Old Testament makes it clear that people are to be God centered rather than self centered. Since all people are created in God's image, a community that is God centered must guard the dignity and well being of all people in the community, especially the poor and weak.

Ancient Israel had ceased to be a community reflecting God's standards of justice. Contrary to God's Law revealed in the Bible they were oppressing the poor and powerless among them. They were also violating the land tenure laws and the seven year release requirements which was God's infrastructure - checks and balances - requiring that those people on the bottom of the economic scale have at least a minimum opportunity to improve their lives. Although **Lamentations** paints a dismal picture, a glimmer of hope is present in the key phrase "Restore us to yourself, O Lord".

The New Testament reveals what it means to restore ourselves to God. In the Gospel of **John** Jesus has just told the disciples he will soon leave them (predicting his betrayal and end of his earthly life). Jesus promises the disciples (and all of us) that those who love him will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to obey his commands. Obeying the commands of Jesus shows that you really love Jesus. Love for Jesus – genuine faith brings love from the Father and from Jesus. So for Christians, restoring ourselves to God, knowing God, means living our lives consistent with Jesus' commands. And if we really love Jesus the Holy Spirit empowers us to do this.

At the very least the teachings of Jesus affirms the standards of justice required by the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. In the Gospel of **Matthew** Jesus declares that he has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets and identifies the love of God and the love of neighbors as the two greatest commandments. In the Gospel of **Luke** Jesus announces he has come to "preach the good news to the poor" and "release the oppressed". The teachings of Jesus require those who love him to work for the standards of justice found in the Old Testament - laws and community structures that protect our most vulnerable citizens from oppression and allow them a minimum opportunity to improve their lives.

In Alabama, where we enjoy the right to vote and have free speech, where more than 90% of us are Christians, we are tolerating injustice embedded in our tax laws. Tax is a matter of justice because all communities need a minimum amount of revenue for roads, schools, police and other common needs we all rely on. Because as fallen humans we are naturally greedy we would never "contribute" our fair share - the law must compel taxation. No amount of beneficence and charity (also a very important part of the teachings of Jesus) will make up for injustice. An "A+" in beneficence and charity will not average an "F" in justice to a "C".

Alabama's income and sales tax laws oppress poor and lower income people by taxing income at poverty levels and imposing high sales taxes on necessities such as food. Our tax laws overtax poor and lower income Alabamians because those with higher incomes and valuable property get off not paying their share. The largest corporations owning vast timber acreage are taxed the same as small farms averaging less than \$1 an acre in property taxes. Timber makes up 71% of Alabama's land and pays less than 2% of the meager property taxes. Small farms should have low property taxes or be exempt. Large profitable pine corporations should pay their fair share.

In Alabama we shamefully disregard our most vulnerable citizens. I focused on public education - the 21st century minimum opportunity for poor and lower income children to improve their lives. Almost 90% of our public schools are funded at "D" and "F" ranges. Even with efforts to address government waste and mismanagement (which we must do) this low level of support for our children cannot be defended and violates the biblical mandate of minimum opportunity. Our revenues are inadequate because Alabamians at higher income levels owning valuable property do not pay their fair share of Alabama's tax burden.

In Alabama today we are not right with God. Historically we turned sharply away from God in 1901 when the beginnings of the injustice of our tax laws was enshrined in our constitution. Since then we have continued on a path further and further away from God. On September 9th we rejected by a 2:1 margin a chance to start getting on the right track. I realize that many voters did not support the bill because it was complicated. Others did not trust that the new revenues above and beyond what was needed to cover the deficit would be spent wisely. The truth is had the bill passed more than half of all Alabamians would have enjoyed a tax cut. And the largest pine corporations and Alabamians at high income levels would have paid more, while small farms would have enjoyed exemptions and other breaks.

Regardless what you thought about the governor's plan, it is clear that we are not prospering. The minimum safety nets of our community, already at substandard level, are getting much worse. Low income Alabamians are losing access to lifesaving medicine, the already dimly funded public schools cannot afford textbooks and prisoners are being released early. The suffering inflicted on our most vulnerable citizens is our 21st century **Lamentations**. Our only hope is to restore ourselves to God. As a community of Bible believing Christians we must turn to Jesus and allow the Holy Spirit to work within us to fight for God's standards of justice. We must insist on fair taxes that raise minimum adequate revenues.

We are being kept from God's standards of justice by greed, fear and mistrust, and apathy. Fair taxes require more from those of us who can afford more and those of us benefitting from unfair taxes are tempted to keep quiet or even actively fight change by distorting the facts. These factual distortions feed into the years of fear and mistrust existing in Alabama.

Luke 12:48 “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” provides the key to defeating the greed, fear and mistrust that is keeping us from being restored to God. We must get over our apathy and use our talents and opportunities to fight for fair taxation. My own personal story is a shameful example of apathy. Despite having great knowledge and training in the tax area it took me seven years to even notice the injustice. Everyone in Alabama must do their part. Alabama’s future really rests in the hands of the local leaders, local pastors and others in the local communities that the people trust. Without local support at the grassroots level the special interests will thwart God’s standards every time.

Alabama is sinking fast. The message of **Lamentations** tells us if we continue to tolerate the wicked injustice foisted on our most vulnerable citizens through an unfair and inadequate tax structure our society will disintegrate. And the strong will perish along with the weak. We will suffer final judgement both at the state and the church level if we continue to sin.

Our only hope is to restore ourselves to God, to truly love Jesus and accept him as our savior. Then the Holy Spirit will wake us up out of our apathy and empower us to defeat greed, fear and mistrust and establish fair taxation and a minimum infrastructure that guards the dignity of all people even “the least of these”, created in the image of God. Once we are restored to God then God’s standards of justice will reign over our community rather than mammon. We are running out of time but we still have a chance. I hope that each and every one of you will prayerfully consider this message and become a disciple of Jesus working towards reclaiming our community for God.