SCRIPTURE INTRO: This winter we’re studying the little book of Amos. Amos is not a book of the Bible that we read very much. I suspect that’s because it has a message that many American Christians would rather ignore. Amos is about God’s judgment. It opens with an image of God as a roaring lion, roaring in righteous anger. It’s a message that’s not intended to comfort us at first—but to frighten us.

But if you open yourself to Amos’ message, and accept it as God’s inspired word, and if you let it have its way with you, then there is profound safety and comfort to be found.
INTRO: I want to start this morning reading something to you that troubles me.  
I read it to you in a sermon about three years ago, so some might remember it.  
It’s a statement by a former PCA minister, a man I knew.  
He had a sharp mind, tremendous spiritual gifts, he led a great many  
people to Christ and discipled them in the faith, he planted a church.  
But he came to a point in his life when he rejected evangelical Christianity.  
He hitched his star to a denomination that has rejected biblical morality.  
This is how he describes the change that took place:  

I had a framework that I studied, taught, defended, and reasoned backwards from. But more and more, it could not contain either my questions or my experiences. Finally the gates opened and all Hell broke loose. To be fair, I didn’t just calmly ring the bell. I brought about my own demise as a pastor, and I can hear people saying (because I have said this about others myself), that I have changed my views on things as a convenient way to rationalize my own sin. That may be true. Nevertheless, I have had a watershed, and there is no going back. There is no stuffing where I have come experientially and theologically back into the [old] jar. I’m just on this wild horse and I can’t stop it.  

He says, my old beliefs couldn’t contain my questions or my experiences.  
What experiences?  
Well, for many years, he was having an affair with a married woman in his church. The longer it went on, the more he began to question whether orthodox Christianity was really true. Especially its moral claims.  
Finally, he reached a point where his conscience and his faith no longer held and as he says, all Hell broke loose. He brought about not only his demise as a pastor, but also the end of two marriages, a church in turmoil, and some confused souls.  

But the damage he did is not the sobering part of this story.  
We all do damage through our sins. Every one of us has.  
Lord in the wonderful business of restoration, binds wounds, works for good.  
The most sobering thing is his eloquent description of how he suddenly reached a point of no return. He describes it as a watershed.  
As being on a wild horse he couldn’t stop.  

He rejected his good conscience year after year, lived in opposition to law of Christ, and that led him to doubt key tenets of the faith.  
And even after all Hell broke loose, rather than being chastened,
and saying, Lord, what a mess I’ve made—help me!
He turned his back on the truth he had once known and said:
I don’t believe that any more.
Apostasy is a word that ought to be in your theological vocabulary. 
Apostasy is rejection of the Christian faith by a person who once claimed the faith.
Apostasy is not the unbelief of people who have never accepted Christ.
Or the unbelief of people who are followers of other religions.
That’s just ordinary unbelief. The Bible sometimes calls that ignorance.
Apostasy is not ignorant unbelief.
It’s informed, deliberate unbelief by a person who was a member of the church.
You might say it’s unbelief by a person who knows better.

This is a much bigger subject in Scripture than we realize.
Let me read you a list of all the different ways the Bible speaks about apostasy.
You are going to be surprised how long this list is and how serious it sounds:
It’s called:
- sinning defiantly, despising the Lord’s word, a spirit of prostitution in their hearts, not acknowledging the Lord, rebellion and breach of faith, silencing the prophets, blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, being led astray by false prophets, love grown cold, falling away, making a shipwreck of your faith, not willing to endure sound doctrine, a form of godliness without power, crucifying the Son of God all over again, subjecting Christ to public disgrace, deliberately continuing to sin after receiving knowledge of the truth, trampling the Son of God under foot, treating as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified, insulting the Spirit of grace, being again entangled in the corruption of the world after escaping it by knowing Jesus Christ, turning one’s back on the sacred command passed on to him, going out from us, and the sin that leads to death

None of those are the actions of unbelievers out there in the world,
or the followers of other religions, or people who have never known Christ.
These are all references to willful unbelief committed by people who were professing Christians and members of the church.

That’s what this passage in Amos is about. It’s about apostasy.
But it doesn’t focus on the apostasy of individuals.
It’s about the apostasy of the church, and how whole branches of the church can reject the word of God and turn against him and fall under his judgment.
It happened to the church in the days of Amos, and to the church in Jesus’ time, and it happened many times to the church since, even in our day.

God loves us and he loves the church. We love the church.
Not just the church in general, but specific manifestations of it, cong, denom.
God’s warnings of judgment are one of the ways he keeps us close to Jesus, both as individual believers and as a church body.

We need to know this stuff. So let’s look at this under three points:

The progress of apostasy, the origin of apostasy, and the defense against apostasy.

Credit where credit is due: Sermon on this passage by Dr. Robert Rayburn.

**MP#1 The progress of apostasy in the church**

Amos starts with a message that the Lord is going to judge Judah.

Judah was the southern kingdom of Israel. God’s chosen people.

For three sins of Judah, even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
Because they have rejected the law of the Lord, they have not kept his decrees, because they have been led astray by false gods . . .

But he doesn’t elaborate on Judah, he goes right for Israel, the northern kingdom.

And that’s what the rest of the book is about.

How Israel has deliberately, persistently rejected the Lord and his word and turned its back on its spiritual heritage.

Now before we look at the details of Israel’s apostasy,

I want you to notice something important—

At this point Judah was not as far gone as Israel.

Judah and Israel were both God’s people.

They were both descendants of Abraham and heirs of God’s covenant promises even though they happened to be divided into two different kingdoms at this time.

But Israel, the northern kingdom, was a spiritual basket case.

It had totally abandoned the faith and rejected, even mocked, the word of God. Israel had become apostate. Judah hadn’t gone that far.

Throughout Judah’s history, a number of good kings who were real believers.

Uzziah, the king of Judah during Amos’ day, was mostly a good and faithful king.

So was Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah, and Josiah.

There was actually a revival during the reign of Josiah.

A copy of the book of Deuteronomy was found and it led to revival.

Many people came back to the Lord.

So Judah had a history of some high points spiritually.

Israel, on the other hand, by this time had became completely apostate.

There were individual Israelites who still believed in Lord and practiced true faith, but the nation as a whole embraced the Canaanite gods and goddesses.
Their life and worship was basically no different from the nations around.
Even though things were not nearly as bad in Judah as they were in Israel,
Amos still warned Judah,
because there were a few key areas where Judah was rejecting God’s law.
Amos warned them because he could see where Judah was heading.
It took a while, about 150 years, but eventually Judah apostatized just like Israel.
Here’s the point.
Apostasy and unbelief does not leap on the church overnight.
It’s a poison that slowly works through the body, usually over generations.
The truth is still known and taught, but mixed in is too much of the thoughts
and practices of the unbelieving culture.
And then, just like the apostasy of individuals, a watershed moment occurs—
there comes a tipping point when false doctrine becomes dominant
and the church turns its back on the Lord and his Word.
Even if it continues institutionally, even if there are here and there true believers,
the church has become apostate.

You don’t have too look any farther than the history of the Presbyterian church
to see the progress of apostasy.
There is an uncanny parallel to Amos in the sense that the Presbyterian church
was divided into a northern and southern denomination around time of Civil War.
The northern church went bad first, and then a whole generation later, southern.

In one very infamous case in the 1930s, the Northern Presbyterian Church
excommunicated one of the most brilliant and godly ministers in the church,
a man named Gresham Machen. Why?
Because he would not be quiet about doctrinal falsehood and would not quit his
efforts to return the church to the faith. He was a son of the church,
born and baptized and ordained in that denomination. They told him to shut up.
Look again at verses 11 & 12 “I raised up prophets from among your own sons.
Is that not true, O Israel . . . You commanded the prophets not to prophesy.”

The Presbyterian church in the South was not anywhere near as bad in 1930s.
The Bible and the Gospel were widely believed and preached in those decades.
But the very same unbelieving ideas and doctrines were tolerated, and in 40
years that denomination also fell into the same apostasy.
That’s the origin of our own denomination, Presbyterian Church in America.
The PCA was started in early 70s by ministers and elders who realized that the
church they loved, the old Southern Presbyterian Church, had passed the tipping point and had closed its ears to faith.

You may wonder: Why are we getting a history lesson? I want something immediate and practical.
   To be a wise, careful, faithful Christian requires the study of history.
   It requires learning the lessons of history God wants you to learn.
   God cares about history. Almost half the Bible is historical narrative.
   Christianity is a historical faith. It’s based on God’s acts in human history.
Here’s a history lesson the Lord Jesus wants his people to know.
   Apostasy progresses.
Look at branches of the church and denominations that have turned their back on the Bible and withered and died spiritually. That didn’t happen overnight.
So how does it start? What’s the genesis of apostasy?
   That brings us to the second point.

**MP#2 The origin of apostasy in the church**
It starts when church rejects the authority of God’s word at some particular point.
   That’s the thin end of the wedge.
That leads to a rejection of the authority of God’s word in more and more areas to the point that false belief and ungodly behavior is not just tolerated, it’s accepted, defended, and celebrated.

Amos says to Judah: Be warned, you’ve rejected the law of the Lord.
   You’ve not kept the decrees of the Lord. What decrees were they rejecting?
   He says they were lead astray by false gods. What does that mean?
There is a refrain in the book of 2 Kings that is repeated over and over about Judah.
   It says even when they had good kings, people kept worshipping at high places.
The law of God said they could only offer sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple.
   It was a way of foreshadowing that salvation could only come through Christ.
But the religious custom of the Canaanites was to offer sacrifices on any hill top.
   That’s what the people of Judah were doing.
   They were making sacrifices to the Lord on these hill top shrines.

You can imagine their arguments for doing so.
   We’re not worshipping other gods, we’re worshipping the Lord.
   Our hearts are in the right place. We’re being true to the spirit of the law.
   It seems so legalistic to insist must only sacrifice in the Temple?
We’re not abandoning Temple worship, just adding option of high places. And they probably used the pragmatic argument that their Canaanite neighbors would be more comfortable so they might come and hear about the true God.

In a great many ways the church of Judah continued to follow the law of God. Many of the externals of worship and practice remained the same. But at this key point, they rejected the authority of God’s Word. And inevitably, future generations are more consistent than parents. They say: Well, if we don’t have to believe and obey the Bible at this point, then why do we have to believe it at any point? If our parents chose a Canaanite cultural practice over biblical practice in this one area of life and still called themselves believers, then why can’t we embrace the whole of Canaanite culture and still consider ourselves the people of God? And that’s exactly what happened in Israel, to the Northern Church.

They cast off the authority of God’s word at every point and became indistinguishable from the Canaanite culture around them. Amos condemns their materialism, their indifference human life and to the weak and needy, their sexual immorality, their refusal to listen to the truth. They became completely apostate—they were the people of God in name only, but they were no longer the church in any real sense.

At one time in American life, the Presbyterian Church was an influential witness for Christ and God’s Word. It founded dozens of Christian colleges and seminaries all across the country. It had one of the largest foreign missionary boards of any church. It produced America’s most brilliant theologians. And it was characterized by a deep piety and seriousness about the faith.

The downfall of the once great Presbyterian Church began with a rejection of the Bible at one point—it was an intellectual point. The seminaries of the Presbyterian Church began to accept and teach a view of the Bible called modernism or liberalism or German criticism—which basically said: We’re modern, scientific people. We know miracles don’t really happen. The miracles in the Bible, the resurrection of Christ, are stories that teach us important spiritual truths. We can still believe the spiritual truths and live by them,
even if we agree that the miracles themselves never happened. We can believe the Bible spiritually and morally, just don’t believe it historically.

There were voices back then who said: You can’t do that. It won’t work.
If you deny the historical reliability of the Bible, will deny moral and spiritual.
There was a famous Presbyterian evangelist Billy Sunday.
He used to say that if you turned hell upside down, it would say on the bottom: “Made in Germany.”
If Presbyterian church follows German criticism, all Hell will break loose.
But it didn’t, at first. For a few decades the Presbyterian Church continued to grow, churches were full, preachers still talked about following Jesus and the Bible, and sending missionaries and the Great Commission . . .
Then a new generation arose which said:
If the Bible’s not reliable historically, then it’s not reliable at all.
We can reshape our beliefs and our church into whatever we want.

Two summers ago, at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA— not our denomination, not the PCA, but at the mainline denomination— there were three important actions.
1. Church affirmed its support of Palestinian State and the Cuban regime.
2. Reaffirmed support for unlimited abortion rights.
3. Voted to permit ministers to perform same-sex marriages.
It’s Amos all over again.

Please understand. I’m not relating this history to give us a pat on the back.
We’re not those bad, liberal Presbyterian, we’re the good, faithful Presbyterians.
This grieves me. What a terrible, terrible loss for the cause of Christ.
This should make us sad and sober. And it should make us ask the question: How do we keep this from happening to us? Let’s consider . . .

MP#3 The defense against apostasy in the church
Earlier in the service Jonathan read 1 Timothy 1:18-20.
In that passage Paul mentions two men who have apostatized— Hymenaeus and Alexander. Paul says they made a shipwreck of their faith.
He’s warning Timothy. Be on guard, don’t let this happen to you.
Paul tells Timothy two things: Hold on to faith and hold on to a good conscience.
Paul’s instructions are just as valid churches as individuals.
Hold on to faith means that you continue to believe and affirm all the foundational doctrines of Scripture.
You hold on to the great truths of the faith—
The Creator God and Jesus Christ and sin and salvation,
and the cross and the resurrection, and heaven and hell—the whole thing!
Yes, I believe the Bible. I believe everything it teaches.
Does that mean I can’t study the Bible and ask questions about it, and wrestle with how, for example, certain modern scientific or historical claims fit understanding?
Of course not. God gave us minds.
But in doing that we’re not going to subject the Bible to human judgments and human philosophies—going to kneel before the Bible because it is God’s word.
And at the heart of it all, I’m going to accept the Bible’s judgment of me, as a sinner in need of God’s grace, and that God’s grace is available in Christ.
That’s what Amos tried to remind Israel of.
The Lord brought you up out of Egypt, led you 40 years in wilderness,
he gave you the Promised Land, took it away from Amorites,
gave you prophets so you could know him. Grace upon grace upon grace.
We have to hold on to faith, not just as individuals, but as a church.

And then Paul says: In addition to hold to faith, you must hold a good conscience. That means you are must be responsive in your innermost soul to divine truth.
It means you must allow all the truths of Scripture to have a moral impact on life. Jesus is Lord, the Bible is his word. I submit all judgments of my life to him.
Does that mean I’m perfectly obedient? Of course not.
But it means that when I fall and sin and disobey, I repent, ask for forgiveness and strength to change my life.

As a church, that means we’re not going to turn a blind eye to ungodly behavior or practices that infiltrate the church, especially those that have the weight of the culture behind them.
Even when the culture says our biblical ethics are backwards, out of date, misogynistic, homophobic, racist, or whatever, we’re going to lovingly, consistently warn and encourage one another. Speak the truth in love.
And we’re never going to baptize immoral and unethical behavior with Christian terminology and call it good.

Faith and a good conscience are inseparable.
In defending the church against apostasy our weapons are the truths of our faith believed with all our hearts and then lived out in humility and repentance. We don’t know what future generations will do.

The Lord calls us to be faithful in our time, and when he calls, gives strength. So let’s take the message of Amos to heart.

As individuals and a congregation let’s commit ourselves afresh to God’s word. Let’s promise ourselves and our children and the Lord that we will listen to him, and remain steadfast in our loyalty to his Word no matter how out of date it may seem in our time or in any time.

For we know:

The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the Word of our God stands forever.