

True Worship

Focal Verses • Amos 5:14-15, 18-27

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will EVALUATE how God establishes justice for the righteous and punishes deceivers, REFLECT on actions of injustice within the community of faith, and COMMIT to stop our participation in unjust actions and help others do the same.

In Focus

Joyce Williams was always dressed beautifully when she came to worship on Sundays. During holiday services like Christmas, Mother's Day, and Easter, her hats could be seen from blocks away.

When the opening hymns began to play, you could always count on Joyce to be yelling loudly at the end of every verse, making sure she was seen as the most visible worshipper in the sanctuary. When the pastor preached you could hear her shouting "Amen!" at the beginning and "I don't know, pastor!" at the end. When the time for offering came, she would always glare at the ushers to let them know she wasn't giving today.

One day as people were beginning to enter the church, there was a young woman who was dressed in a cutoff shirt and tight skirt walking in with an older woman. Joyce began to talk out loud.

"Oh, I don't know about these girls today. Dressing like hussies, can't keep their clothes on and have the nerve to show up in God's house." The young lady looked embarrassed. Just then Pastor Freeman walked past.

"Everyone is welcome in God's house, Ms. Williams, regardless of how they look. If your hats can make it in, so can this young lady's clothes," said Pastor Freeman defiantly.

What does it mean to truly worship God? Is it more about what happens in church or how we live in the world?

Keep in Mind

"But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:24, KJV).

Say It Correctly

Tabernacle – TA-ber-na-hul

Damascus – da-MAS-kus

Moloch – MOE-lokh

Sikkuth – see-KOOTH

KJV

Amos 5:14-15, 18-27

14 Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken.

15 Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light.

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19 As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him.

20 Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? Even very dark, and no brightness in it?

21 I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies.

22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

25 Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?

26 But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves.

27 Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the LORD, whose name is The God of hosts.

NLT

Amos 5:14-15, 18-27

14 Do what is good and run from evil so that you may live! Then the LORD God of Heaven's Armies will be your helper, just as you have claimed.

15 Hate evil and love what is good; turn your courts into true halls of justice. Perhaps even yet the LORD God of Heaven's Armies will have mercy on the remnant of his people.

18 What sorrow awaits you who say, "If only the day of the LORD were here!" You have no idea what you are wishing for. That day will bring darkness, not light.

19 In that day you will be like a man who runs from a lion—only to meet a bear. Escaping from the bear, he leans his hand against a wall in his house—and he's bitten by a snake.

20 Yes, the day of the LORD will be dark and hopeless, without a ray of joy or hope.

21 "I hate all your show and pretense—the hypocrisy of your religious festivals and solemn assemblies.

22 I will not accept your burnt offerings and grain offerings. I won't even notice all your choice peace offerings.

23 Away with your noisy hymns of praise! I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 Instead, I want to see a mighty flood of justice, an endless river of righteous living.

25 "Was it to me you were bringing sacrifices and offerings during the forty years in the wilderness, Israel?

26 No, you served your pagan gods— Sakkuth your king god and Kaiwan your star god—the images you made for yourselves.

27 So I will send you into exile, to a land east of Damascus," says the LORD, whose name is the God of Heaven's Armies.

The People, Places, and Times

Feast Days. There were three major feast days in the nation of Israel: the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Passover), the Feast of Harvest (Pentecost), and the Feast of Ingathering (Tabernacles). These were pilgrimage festivals that required participation from the entire Israelite community. All work was to cease and travelers made their way from all over Israel to celebrate these festivals in Jerusalem.

Amos. The prophet Amos was born in the city of Tekoa. He prophesied in Israel around 750 B.C. He was not the descendant of prophets; rather, he was from "among the herdsmen of Tekoa" (from Amos 1:1). He was a shepherd and also tended and gathered sycamore figs. He received his call to ministry while he was

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out in the pastures, with his sheep (Amos 7:14–15). His career as a shepherd and a common working man informed his view of the world and the way he communicated his prophetic message. He used images from nature and agriculture in his prophecies. Amos lived during an era of relative peace and prosperity. This prosperity led to an atmosphere of indulgent luxury, corrupt power, and moral depravity in Israel. Many had turned to the worship of idols and other gods. Some religious practices were still maintained; however, these had deteriorated into empty rituals. Israel's religion didn't have the intended impact on how they lived their lives.

Sikkuth (Moloch) & Kaiwan (Chiun). Sikkuth is another name for the Mesopotamian astral deity Sakkut (Ninib). This god was also associated with the planet Saturn. Kaiwan was the Babylonian Saturn god. The name means “the steadiest one” and is taken from Saturn's slow-moving orbit. The differences in spelling are likely because when foreign gods were referenced, the original vowels were often replaced with the vowels from the Hebrew word for “abomination.” The Phoenicians were thought to offer human sacrifices to this god.

Background

Amos begins chapter 5 as a eulogy for the “dead” nation of Israel. Israel was not yet dead, but the lament was meant to impress on the nation the severe danger it was in. The death of Israel is described as the death of a virgin (v. 2). The death of a virgin would have been considered particularly tragic because she had no children to carry on her memory. This type of death is distinctly permanent. Furthermore, the dead virgin is described as having been left lying in a field, unburied. To leave a body unburied would have been a shocking and appalling image to consider, yet this is how the demise of Israel is described. Its depraved moral climate and refusal to turn back to God had indeed set it on the path of destruction.

Israel could not trust in the power of its armies to defend them against the coming destruction. Amos declared that their armies would be systematically cut down in battle (v. 3). Their trust in false gods was misplaced. The Israelites were known to visit idol temples in Bethel, Gilgal, and Beersheba. But Amos announced that each of these is set for destruction as well. Their only hope was to return to God. Amos repeatedly declared the way of escape for some. If they will seek after God, they will live (vv. 4, 6). Despite Amos' lament, he presented God's offer to save a remnant who would turn to Him.

How can we create idols in places where we are supposed to be worshipping God like in church?

At-A-Glance

1. Love Good, Hate Evil (Amos 5:14–15)
2. A Day of Darkness (vv. 18–20)
3. God Desires Justice, Not Empty Rituals (vv. 21–24)
4. Israel's Idolatry Results in Exile (vv. 25–27)

In Depth

1. Love Good, Hate Evil (Amos 5:14–15)

Israel has become complacent in their presumption of God's favor (v. 14). Israel has mistakenly believed that, despite their sinful ways and their worship of other gods, they can still count on God's protection. However, Amos declared to them that their actions had displeased God and would have destroyed their nation. For some to be spared, they must seek good and avoid evil. The two-fold action of seeking and avoiding is emphasized in verse 15. They are to “hate” the evil and “love” the good. The terms “hate” and

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“love” indicate decisions that one must make. Seeking good is connected with choosing to love good. Avoiding evil is connected to choosing to hate evil.

What would it mean to love good in our lives today?

2. A Day of Darkness (Amos 5:18–20)

Again, the prophet’s message seizes on Israel’s presumption of God’s favor. It was common in times of trouble for the Israelites to long for “the day of the LORD,” when God would rescue them from their enemies. But “the day of the LORD” will now be a day of reckoning. For those who have turned to idols and denied justice to the poor, there will be no rescue, but rather darkness and judgment waiting for them. This will be a jarring turn of events for Israel. It is described metaphorically as escaping a lion, only to find that you must escape a bear, then resting at home, only to find that a snake is waiting to bite you.

Why do people often want God’s judgment on others but not on themselves?

3. God Desires Justice, Not Empty Rituals (Amos 5:21–24)

The worship of other gods had seeped into Israel’s religious practices, but the people still maintained their Israelite rituals and festivals too. However, God is not fooled by their empty worship. True worship flows out of the hearts of those who earnestly seek to follow God’s will. A true worshiper’s relationships and personal life will be consistent with public worship. Israel’s worship is hypocritical. They publicly give offerings to God and worship Him with their music, but they continue to reject justice and righteousness in their everyday lives. Their religious practices have become distasteful to God, and He refuses their show of piety. Rather than continued injustice and hypocrisy, the Lord desires a continual, daily flow of justice and righteousness.

How does seeing worship as a lifestyle help us to avoid being hypocrites?

4. Israel’s Idolatry Results in Exile (Amos 5:25–27)

Israel’s unfaithfulness is called out here. In addition to making offerings to the Lord, they have begun worshipping foreign deities. Idol worship often included parades in which the people would carry handmade representations of their gods. Amos describes an image that depicts Israel, the chosen people of the Lord, the one true God, carrying around idols made to worship other gods (v. 26). It is a sad betrayal of the God who had redeemed them. Idolatry leads to injustice. It is at the root of their oppression of others and their choice to love evil and not good. As a result, the Lord will send them into exile— what happens to all those who choose other gods?

What sinful symptoms in our world are connected to idols we don’t think about as much?

Search the Scriptures

1. What do you think it would have looked like for an Israelite to love good and hate evil during this time in Israel’s history (Amos 5:14–15)?
2. What were the attitudes and motives of the Israelite worshipers (Amos 5:21–23)?
3. Why did God refuse their worship (Amos 5:25–27)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. Amos declared that God desires justice and righteousness, not religious practices that do not impact our lives. How does your public worship inform your desire for social justice in our society?

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2. Amos instructed Israel to love good and hate evil. How might you love good and hate evil in your daily life?

3. How would others know that you love good and hate evil?

Liberating Lesson

Most Christians have no problem determining the difference between good and evil. In fact, even non-believers often choose to do the right thing. But merely choosing not to do evil is different than actively opposing evil. Opposing evil requires a level of conviction that goes beyond a simple understanding of right and wrong. This concept has been examined in social experiments and hidden camera television shows. During these experiments, an unsuspecting participant is presented with a scenario requiring them to determine right or wrong morally. Generally, participants will choose to do the right thing. The scenario is then changed slightly. Now the participant is presented with a scenario in which someone does wrong to another person. The participant must decide to either intervene or ignore the injustice they witness. It is often the case that only certain individuals will go out of their way to oppose an injustice. Most people are content to sit by while others are mistreated. God desires Christians to seek to do good and oppose evil and injustice. We are charged with standing for justice in our communities and in our world.

Application for Activation

It is often difficult to choose to love good and hate evil. One way to be prepared for those times and situations where we have decisions to make is to determine what is good or evil. Get a piece of paper and write “Love Good” on one side and “Hate Evil” on the other. On the “Love Good” side, write all the ways to seek good daily. On the “Hate Evil” side, write all the ways you can hate evil daily. Thinking about these things beforehand can help us avoid falling into sin and move us forward in serving others in our community.

More Light on the Text

Amos 5:14–15, 18–27, KJV

14 Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken.

Amos prophesies with the refrain of seeking. The root of the word “seek” (Heb. *darash*, da-RASH) used in verses 4 and 6 to refer to the people seeking the idol sanctuaries and then to seek God. Now, Amos uses it to refer to good as opposed to evil. The good that the people are to seek is justice for the poor. Amos holds out the promise of the Lord’s presence if they seek good. This highlights the fact that the Lord is not with them to begin with because of their injustice and oppression.

15 Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph.

This seeking of good is more than just an outward action. It must radiate from an attitude of the heart. Amos uses strong words here. Seeking good is called hating (Heb. *sane'*, sah-NAY) evil. In other passages of the Old Testament, this word is used to refer to an enemy. The Israelites had been friends with evil and stood on the side of injustice. Amos confronts them and challenges them to choose sides by using this word. Being on the side of good means establishing “judgment in the gate.” The gates of the town were often used for courts of justice and centers of trade, and there, the Israelites did most of their oppression of the poor. So this is where they could show that they love good and hate evil instead.

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If the people would seek God and seek good instead of seeking the sanctuaries at Bethel and Gilgal, then maybe He would be gracious (Heb. *khanan*, khah-NAHN) to them. Amos is communicating that there is still the possibility of God showing favor and mercy to them. A remnant of Joseph is offered grace. After breaking away from the Southern Kingdom of Judah, the ten tribes became the northern kingdom of Israel. To refer to the remnant of Joseph is to appeal to those who will choose to seek good.

18 Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light. 19 As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. 20 Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

“The day of the LORD” is a term that refers to the Lord appearing and bringing judgment on the nations. Amos implies that those Israelites who are involved in oppressing the poor longed for this Day of Judgment. He tells them that it will not be a good time for them; it will be darkness, not light. The images of running from a lion only to meet a bear or running into a house to be bitten by a serpent describe the Day of the Lord as a time when they cannot escape God’s judgment.

21 I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. 22 Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts.

Outwardly impressive religious acts of goodwill that are selfishly done do not move the heart of God. The word “feast” (Heb. *hag*, KHAG) refers to the three main festivals that God established in Israel: Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Exodus 23:14– 19; Deuteronomy 16:16–17). Israel was abusing all of these festivals. God rejected what Israel did in these feasts, which had a form of godliness but lacked the power and intention of them. The implication is that God Himself may establish events, activities, or procedures, but His people can pervert, abuse, and misuse them to achieve their selfish ends. Amos possibly refers to the solemn assembly on the seventh day of Feast of Unleavened Bread and the eighth day of the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus 23:8, 36). The Lord would not be pleased with any of the worship practiced on those days because of the absence of justice and right living.

None of the offerings prescribed in the law would please God. The Lord would not accept their burnt offerings (Heb. *'olot*, oh-LOHT), where the whole animal was consumed with fire. He would not accept their meat offerings (Heb. *minkhah*, min-KHAH). These were sacrifices devoid of blood and intended as gifts to the Lord. Lastly, He would not accept their peace offerings (Heb. *weh shelem*, weh SHEH-lehm), as these gifts were a sign of reconciliation or friendship, and this was not the state of their relationship with God. All of the worship rituals here were to be symbols of the people’s real-life walk with the Lord, and offering them without the true faithfulness behind them was hypocritical. The hypocrisy made their offerings unacceptable to the Lord.

23 Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols.

Celebrations and rejoicing in God’s presence played an important part in Israel’s Temple worship, which God had established. The Israelites used many kinds of musical instruments to praise God for His goodness and faithfulness (2 Chronicles 7; Psalm 149). In this instance, the Lord calls the noise of their song a problem. It is not the joyful noise of Psalm 100:1, but the noise and confusion of a host of people—noise that the Lord does not want to hear.

24 But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

God illustrates the nature of judgment (justice) and righteousness by using the phrases “run down as waters” and “as a mighty stream,” which speak of the ongoing and unobstructed movement of an

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everflowing body of water. The word for stream, *nakhal* (Heb. **NAH**-khall), is the word for the desert wadi. These small, narrow valleys lay dry and barren for much of the year until a torrent of rain flooded them and made them into flowing streams. The Lord has already laid out the stipulations of justice in His covenant, and He is waiting for His people to fill the dry and barren land with justice and righteousness as the rains fill up a desert wadi.

25 Have ye offered unto me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? 26 But ye have borne the tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images, the star of your god, which ye made to yourselves. 27 Therefore will I cause you to go into captivity beyond Damascus, saith the LORD, whose name is The God of hosts.

The Lord ends His pronouncement of judgment upon Israel's hypocritical worship with a rhetorical question. He asks if the Israelites have offered sacrifices to Him in the wilderness. While sacrifices were made to the Lord in the wilderness, they were not a regular feature in Israel's religious life until they were in the Promised Land. The Lord affirms that His relationship with them was not dependent on sacrifices and offerings. He had been with them in the wilderness without regular sacrifices.

Next, He confronts them on their worship of idols. They have paraded images of foreign gods through their streets to their shrines. Sacrifices, sacred dancing, and other perverse forms of worship followed this parade. Many translations say the "tabernacle of your Moloch and Chiun your images." Sikkuth is more probable as Sikkuth and Kaiwan were worshiped astral deities in Mesopotamia. At the same time, Moloch was associated more with Syria-Palestine, and the worship practices here are associated with Mesopotamia and the influences of the Assyrians. The meaning of the text does not change as either epithet refers to a deity associated with Saturn in the ancient world. In ancient times, Saturn was observed as a star that influenced agriculture. This explains the reference to "the star of your god" (v. 26). In the next verse, Amos predicts that they will be carried away captive instead of carrying their gods to the shrine to worship. The phrase "beyond Damascus" points toward the coming Assyrian invasion that would take place and the resulting demise of the Northern Kingdom.

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Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

Isaiah 18–22
Psalm 65:9–13

TUESDAY

Isaiah 23–27
Psalm 66:1–4

WEDNESDAY

Isaiah 28–30
Psalm 66:5–12

THURSDAY

Isaiah 31–35
Psalm 66:13–20

FRIDAY

Isaiah 36–41
Psalm 67

SATURDAY

Isaiah 42–44
Psalm 68:1–6

SUNDAY

Isaiah 45–48
Psalm 68:7–1