ADULT SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON
GOD IS NOT FOOLED

MINISTRY INVOCATION
“O God: We give thanks to You for the manifold blessings to us. You did not have to bless us but You did. We shall remain eternally grateful. Amen.”

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW AND UNDERSTAND
The people learned through Amos that God will not be fooled by insincere offerings and will severely punish all sinners.

THE APPLIED FULL GOSPEL DISTINCTIVE
We believe in the indwelling of the Holy Ghost for all believers and that the Holy Ghost verifies and validates the Believer as part of the Body of Christ.

TEXT:
Background Scripture – Amos 5
Key Verse – Amos 5:24
Lesson Scripture – Amos 5:14-15, 18-27

Amos 5:14–15 (NKJV)
14 Seek good and not evil,
That you may live;
So the L ORD God of hosts will be with you,
As you have spoken.
15 Hate evil, love good;
Establish justice in the gate.
It may be that the L ORD God of hosts
Will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Amos 5:18–27 (NKJV)
18 Woe to you who desire the day of the L ORD!
For what good is the day of the L ORD to you?
It will be darkness, and not light.
19 It will be as though a man fled from a lion,
And a bear met him!
Or as though he went into the house,
Leaned his hand on the wall,
And a serpent bit him!
20 Is not the day of the L ORD darkness, and not light?
Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it?
21 “I hate, I despise your feast days,
And I do not savor your sacred assemblies.

22 Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
Nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.

23 Take away from Me the noise of your songs,
For I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments.

24 But let justice run down like water,
And righteousness like a mighty stream.

25 “Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings
In the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?

26 You also carried Sikkuth your king
And Chiun, your idols,
The star of your gods,
Which you made for yourselves.

27 Therefore I will send you into captivity beyond Damascus,”
Says the LORD, whose name is the God of hosts.

COMMENTARY

5:14 While the first exhortation to “seek” was set in contrast to seeking corrupt sanctuaries (5:4) and the second with receiving the fiery blast of God’s judgment (5:6), here it is in contrast to seeking evil. Seeking what is good is not the same as seeking God, but it is a corollary. Seeking God and seeking good represent the two dimensions of true religion, not rituals and forms but relationships with God and other persons. “Good” refers to that which pleases God, especially justice for the poor. To “seek” it in this context means not only to live in such a way oneself but also actively to endeavor to see good prevail over evil, the denial of justice for the poor. One who truly seeks the Lord also seeks the welfare of the poor.

Twice in vv. 14–15 Amos formulated conditional promises. One promise is that God will really be with His audience as they claimed He was (v. 14b). The phrase that begins the promise expresses purpose and could be translated, “That it may be so, [that] Yahweh God of hosts will be with you, just as you have said.” Amos’s words also are similar to those of the divine messengers who accepted Abraham’s offer of hospitality with the response, “Do as you say” (Gen 18:5). In spite of their practice of injustice and corrupt worship, the people in Israel continued to claim that God was with them and to encourage one another with these words. As long as they continued seeking evil rather than good, it was not so. Israel had only been lying to themselves.

The title for God is literally “Yahweh God of hosts.” It stresses that the God of Israel has sovereign power over the affairs of earth and heaven. If such a God were with them, at their side and on their behalf, they could be assured not only
of military victory but also of true success and security. To offend such a God meant certain disaster. Just as seeking him and His ways meant life, failing to do so meant death.

5:15 If Israel were to seek good, they must love good, almost an equivalent expression. To love something means to choose it and to delight in it, and to delight in seeing good prevail, one must hate evil. That is, one must abhor behavior that displeases God, as the wicked hate and despise righteousness (v. 10). Amos was exhorting his audience to pursue and embrace justice passionately and to hound and crush injustice just as passionately. At the time there was no justice at the gate for the poor. Amos was ordering his audience to reestablish it.

5:18 The prophet’s announcement of woe for those desiring the day of the Lord must have shocked his audience. They expected the day of the Lord to bring victory, blessing, and brightness. They considered themselves to be God’s people and worthy of God’s rescue. Amos rebuked and warned them that it would be rather a day of “darkness not light.” “Darkness” implies defeat, calamity, and evil. Contrary to their expectation for the day, no victory, no blessing, and no brightness would come for them.

5:19 To illustrate how dark the day would be for Israel, the prophet used two comparisons, both showing the inescapability of disaster. The first comparison is with one who flees from a lion only to run headlong into a bear. Whichever direction he goes, he is doomed. The second comparison is with the one who enters a house, thinking he is safe, only to be bitten by a snake. The day of the Lord in all its darkness will be that inescapable for Israel.

5:20 Amos concluded with a final rhetorical question aimed at challenging the popular understanding of what the day of the Lord would mean to them. Only a dismal future awaited those whose false sense of security was encouraging them in sinful behavior. “Pitch-dark, without a ray of brightness” describes a gloomy, hopeless future.

In a sense the error of the prophet’s audience was not so much in their understanding of the general characteristics of the day of the Lord. Defeat of God’s enemies and blessing for God’s people were the two cardinal elements of the day. God’s people failed to understand the nature of their relationship with the Lord. By their corrupt lives, they had become God’s enemy, and as such they would experience defeat and destruction.

A constant danger for God’s people is false presumption of how God’s revelation relates to them. Often they see themselves as God’s friends when in reality they are God’s enemies (cf. v. 14). Enthusiastic proclaimers of the Lord’s return must be careful to identify correctly their relationship to God.
The setting for 5:21–27 probably was Bethel at the royal sanctuary. Amos may have interrupted a cultic festival there. This could explain the abrupt divine first-person address without the usual introductory messenger formula. These verses demonstrate clearly that Israel was not judged for lack of religion. They were celebrating religious holidays with “feasts” and “assemblies” (v. 21); they were bringing “burnt offerings,” “grain offerings,” and “choice fellowship offerings” (v. 22); and they were filling the air with “songs” of worship and with instrumental “music” (v. 23). The Lord’s rejection of this religious activity could not have been expressed more strongly: “I hate, I despise,” “I cannot stand,” “I will not accept,” “I will have no regard,” and “I will not listen.” God rejected every aspect of Israel’s worship. They were inundating him with rivers of religiosity when he wanted rivers of righteousness and justice (v. 24).

5:21 Amos, acting as God’s representative, methodically considered each element in Israel’s worship and rejected each one. One function of a cultic priest was to announce to the worshiper God’s acceptance of and delight in the sacrifices. To be greeted by a barrage of words of rejection from God’s prophet must have been shocking to the prophet’s audience.

“Hate” and “despise” are strong words. The term for “hate” is used three times in Amos, all in this chapter. Rather than hating evil (v. 15), Israel hated advocates of righteousness. Therefore, God hated their presumptuous worship (v. 21). Those events the Old Testament designates as “feasts” were the annual pilgrimage festivals of Unleavened Bread or Passover, Weeks or Harvest, and Tabernacles or Ingathering. Whether the Northern Kingdom followed this calendar is uncertain, but their festivals would have been similar.

It pictures God receiving with delight the rising odor of the offering, so its negation here means he rejects it. Rather than an individual sacrifice, Amos applied the term to Israel’s whole festive “assemblies,” which were like a foul odor to God. False worship arising from sinful lives is worse than unacceptable to him.

5:22 The next element of Israel’s worship that God rejected was the presentation of sacrifices. The three sacrifices mentioned are the first three of the five main Levitical offerings presented in Leviticus 1–7. These are the “pleasing-aroma offerings” because of the phrase occurring with them and because they are the ones that in particular represent consecration and worship as opposed to the other two offerings used solely for atonement. Clearly they represent here the false worship in Israel that the Lord despised.

“Burnt offerings” were sacrifices in which the entire animal was consumed on the altar and arose to God in smoke. “Grain offerings” could also be used of various sacrifices brought as a gift. “Fellowship offerings” were those in which part of the animal was consumed on the altar and part of it was eaten by the
worshiper, thus symbolizing communion between the worshiper and God. The idea is that God is not pleased to see them.

5:23 Singing and playing the “harp” were forms of rendering cultic praise. God evaluated the sound of their songs as “noise” and ordered that it be taken elsewhere. He refused to listen to their instruments. The passage pictures God’s rejection of Israel’s worship in terms of body language: shut nostrils, closed eyes, and stopped up ears. While Israel’s worship was required to be in accordance with divine regulations, that was not the problem that faced Amos. God’s acceptance or rejection of human expressions of worship is based on his assessment of the motives of the heart.

5:24 Only words of rejection greeted the prophet’s audience as he spoke of element after element of their worship. The missing ingredient in their worship was authenticity manifested in a lifestyle of obedience. Israel’s rejection of justice and righteousness in the social order made inevitable God’s rejection of their worship activities.

God’s will was for justice and righteousness to prevail in Israel’s social order as an outward sign of their religious devotion. Justice would mean “reparation for the defrauded, fairness for the less fortunate, and dignity and compassion for the needy”; righteousness would entail “attitudes of mercy and generosity, and honest dealings that imitate the character of God” as revealed in the law of Moses. While these are always part of God’s demands for an obedient lifestyle, they are not His only requirements. If Amos were evaluating worship activities today, he might point to other aspects of lifestyle that are signs of a lack of genuineness, thus making worship displeasing and unacceptable to God. Amos’s point was that “the way people behave in the marketplace or how they judge in the gate” are as much a part of worship as singing and sacrifice. Religious activity is no substitute for national or personal righteousness. It may even sometimes be a hindrance. This may have been the way Israel responded to the Lord’s discipline (cf. 4:6–11) rather than with true repentance.

“Like a river” is literally “like the waters.” court. The noun translated “stream” refers to a wadi, which typically is dry or contains only a trickle of water except in the rainy season when it gushes with torrents of water. God demanded that justice and righteousness be produced in Israel like a wadi in the rainy season. But he did not want it to be restricted or sporadic but pervasive, overflowing like a flood, and permanent, like a river that never runs dry. God’s expectations of justice and righteousness in society have remained constant generation after generation.

5:25 The message of vv. 21–24 is clear that God rejected Israel’s false worship, as is the message of v. 27 that he was going to send them into exile. Sacrifices and
offerings in themselves could not make Israel right with God and so could not keep them from exile.

The point would be that Israel was behaving again as they had in the wilderness when they brought sacrifices and offerings to the Lord while at the same time practicing idolatry. Therefore, their attendance at the altar was clearly not a sure sign of their faith or a sufficient way to please God.

There is reason to believe, however, that sacrifices and offerings were severely limited during the wilderness years. Though inaugurated at Sinai, “sacrificing and its association with the three yearly festivals became regular only after the conquest.” Amos’s point in this case would be that in the absence of a regular sacrificial system, God still maintained a relationship with His people and blessed and cared for them. Therefore, the sacrificial system alone is clearly not sufficient to gain God’s favor.

Wilderness years were not trouble free, but a close relationship between God and Israel characterized the period. Sacrifices and offerings did not maintain that relationship. Amos confronted a people who were eager and extravagant in their sacrifices and offerings, but those activities did not put them right with God. God is not pleased by acts of pomp and grandeur but by wholehearted devotion and complete loyalty.

5:26 Israel’s relative obedience to God during the wilderness wanderings degenerated immediately upon their settlement in the promised land, in spite of the beginning of regular sacrifices at that time. Israel did not practice idolatry after leaving Egypt, a view countered by the incident with the golden calf in the wilderness to which Stephen referred in a context that cites these verses (Acts 7:39–43).

This was the prophet’s way of ridiculing these pagan gods. The folly of carrying about such images is that Israel “made” them. Homemade gods regularly disappoint the ones who fashion them. “Therefore” in v. 27 indicates that v. 26 speaks of idolatry during Amos’s time. But verse 25 would suggest that idolatry also was a problem in the wilderness. This seems to be a point of comparison, then, between the wilderness generation and Amos’s Israel.

5:27 God had delivered the people out of their exile in the wilderness (those who did not commit idolatry) into the promised land. Now God was about to drive them back into exile. God’s judgment word for Israel was “exile beyond Damascus.” This word was for a people who were enthusiastic in their worship but misguided in their devotion. This word would be carried out by Yahweh, the God of hosts. No intermediate agent is named. The absence of justice and righteousness in Israel and the presence of idolatry there meant that the nation could not survive the judgment of God.
RELATED DISCUSSION TOPICS

CLOSING PRAYER
My God: I am grateful to have found You and kept You in the forefront of my being. Bless us continually with Your grace and mercy. They represent bountiful blessings for all of us. Amen.