

LESSON ONE
No Exceptions

FOCAL TEXT

Amos 1:1–3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1, 4–16

BACKGROUND

Amos 1–2

MAIN IDEA

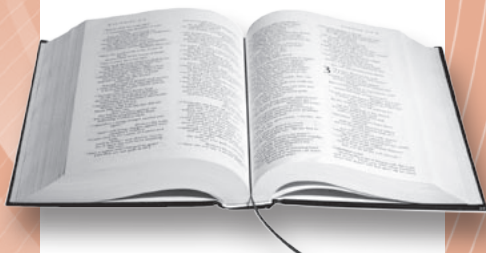
God makes no exceptions in holding people accountable for their actions.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

Are we really so exceptional that God's expectations do not apply to us?

TEACHING AIM

To lead adults to acknowledge that God's expectations apply to themselves and not merely to everyone else



AMOS
The End Has Come

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The opening message in the Book of Amos, presented in Amos 1—2, might have been placed first in the book because it was Amos's main message. When his oracles were collected and placed together in the scroll that preserved his ministry and bore his name, this particular sermon, among all possible choices, was given prominence.

Almost every preacher has favorite themes, perhaps even a favorite sermon on a biblical passage or doctrine that has become personally significant as God's truth for life. For example, my favorite sermon is based on Psalm 139, a wonderful assurance that God is always with us in whatever we are facing. It's my own *big sermon*, and I love to share it with others.

The Israelite audiences of Amos certainly came to know his most frequent theme: God would judge sinful wrongdoing *anywhere* it might be found. This theme unites the various parts of the Book of Amos, which consists mostly of oracles of judgment.

The opening passage makes the key point with remarkable clarity and unusual effectiveness. Amos had polished and perfected this sermon so that he could drive home the message in such a way that no one could miss it. What a preacher he was!

Interpreting the Scriptures

Introducing the Prophet and His Times (1:1)

In each book that comes to us from one of the Old Testament prophets, the opening few verses typically identify the prophet himself. Who was Amos, the prophetic spokesman for God whose words would follow in this book? When and where did he live and preach? Scholars call this brief preface the *superscription* to the book because it represents general statements *about* the prophet that are placed in front of the words *from* the prophet.

Efficiently, the final editor of the scroll told us that Amos was a shepherd from rural Tekoa in Judah. His messages grew from visions he saw. His occupation reveals that he was a layman, not a priest. We learn later (Amos 7:14) that he was a *diversified agri-businessman* who marketed both animal products and the fruit of a certain fig tree.

During the forty-year reigns of King Jeroboam in the Northern kingdom and King Uzziah in the Southern kingdom, Amos was called to be a prophet “two years before the earthquake.”¹ Although we are not told exactly which tremor this was from among the many that occurred in the Ancient Near East, biblical scholars and archaeologists have estimated the date for Amos to be around 760 B.C.

The Theme of His Preaching (1:2)

Divine judgment on human sin was the simple but powerful theme that pervaded the preaching ministry of Amos. From a temple throne in Jerusalem, God thundered with a scorching judgment that melted the snows of Mount Carmel and withered the grass of the valleys. This single verse represents a kind of overture for the whole book.

The *Big Sermon* About God’s All-Inclusive Judgment (1:3, 6, 9, 13, 2:1, 4–16)

Amos was a master at speech communication. Although he was a native of a very rural area, he was not an unpolished *country bumpkin* but a man of the earth who was a careful student of images and phrases that reached the human mind and heart. We may safely assume that he held his audience spellbound—shrewdly holding the *punch line* until the end. In fact, he lured his Israelite listeners into his preacher’s *trap* so they could not deflect his message that was intended for them.

1:3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1. Like a drum beat, the refrain of indictment, “for three transgressions . . . and for four” rings repeatedly throughout this sermon. One people after another, in a carefully planned geographical sequence, fell under the judgment of God for their war crimes, atrocities against humanity, or other national sins. Amos gradually *tightened the noose* as he singled out Damascus to the far north and east (1:3), Gaza to the southwest (1:6), Tyre to the northwest (1:9), Edom to the far south and

east (1:11), Ammon to the east (1:13), Moab to the southeast (2:1), Judah to the due south (2:4), and then his target audience, Israel, who was right in front of him (2:6).

These are called *oracles against the nations* (or *foreign prophecies*) because all but the last two deal with judgments from God directed against foreign nations who were outside the Sinai Covenant. The peoples among “the nations,” the Gentiles, didn’t even accept Yahweh as God, but the judgment of God is universal. God’s worldwide created order means that all peoples everywhere must respect other human life, showing the basic decency that any reasonable person might expect. So Amos cataloged their failures to be inhumane and clearly pronounced God’s judgment against their crimes.

2:4–5. Judah was also fair game for God’s judgment, even though they were among the twelve tribes chosen to enter into the Sinai Covenant. In fact, *because* they were citizens of the covenant relationship with God, they should have acted at a moral level that was far higher than the nations. But they, too, acted like pagans, so they would receive the same punishment of destructive defeat. And in 587 B.C., the Babylonians arrived in Judah and meted out God’s punishment.

Rather than follow the *Torah* (the Hebrew word literally means *teaching, instruction, guidelines for living*), Judah repudiated and broadly ignored even God’s universal, all-encompassing standards for relationships. Failing to maintain proper relationship with God or other members of God’s chosen people, they were strikingly similar to their idolatrous forefathers who were led astray by lies and false gods (see Exodus 32 for a classic early example).

2:6–7. Israel, too, was as guilty as anyone else. Actually, they always were the prime target in the crosshairs of Amos’ prophetic *big sermon*. As they heard the earlier stanzas, the Israelite listeners likely had been saying *amen* to all of his lists of charges against other guilty peoples because, of course, *they deserved it*. But then Amos applied the very same basic standards of right and wrong to *their* behavior, and it was too late for them to change the rules to make things more lenient for themselves. The standards of God already had been set for others, and so they must be applied to all. God’s concern for justice is universal, and God’s judgments apply to all.

Amos specified many particular shortcomings of Judah's broad faithlessness. As a keen observer, the prophet saw insensitivity and gross immorality all around. To "sell" someone meant to press a person into slavery because he could not pay his debts, even if only a small amount was owed. The poor became hopeless and crushed. The "way" of justice was perverted in courts where the process was corrupted and unfair. And promiscuous sexual activity meant that God's standards for sexual purity were violated and a confident genealogical lineage was contaminated (see Deuteronomy 27:20; Leviticus 18:6–18).

2:8. In clear violation of specific instructions about receiving and returning a person's cloak as the security one held for his debt (Exod. 22:26–27), some rich Israelites apparently were taking advantage of the poor, even at the worship shrines. These sinners loved neither God nor neighbor. Their religious practice was self-centered and thereby emptied of genuine covenant love.

2:9–12. In their earlier days and under God's leadership and initiative, Israel received a Promised Land (even despite the giants, as in Numbers 13:25–33). The conquest and possession of the land occurred only after God led their escape from the horrors of Egyptian slave camps and through the stresses of the wilderness journey. God even called prophets like Amos to guide them consistently in truth, and God gave them Nazirites as examples of religious zeal and spiritual commitment (Numbers 6:1–21; Judges 16:17; 1 Samuel 1:11).

When Israel made her own free choices, the results too often were feeble, disappointing failures. The people at large fell far short of God's will when they corrupted the vows of the Nazirites (Judg. 13:14; Num. 6:3), not to mention repudiating and persecuting the prophets who were God's designated voices for truth.

2:13–16. So God's judgment "on that day" of reckoning would come upon Israel. Using the language reserved for a hostile and terrible conqueror, Amos described God's own action in punishment against the people of Israel.

The God of the Exodus, wilderness, and conquest was portrayed by Amos as the God who pressed a judgment battle against Israel. Earlier in their history together, God first introduced Israel to God's will through

acts of blessed provision. But now God would remind them of God's purposes by means of strong disciplinary action. Always, in every circumstance, Israel might decide to respond and to return to God.

Focusing on the Meaning

Jesus told the story of two men who went into the temple in Jerusalem to pray (take time to read Luke 18:9–14 and think about Amos as you do). In spiritual pride and arrogant superiority, one man prayed, *I am so glad that I am not like that sinful man over there. You and I both know how righteous I really am, God.* But the other man, in humble recognition of his own shortcomings before Holy God, begged, *Lord, show mercy to me, a sinner.*

Smug self-righteousness and spiritual superiority is a dangerous attitude in the life of the Christian disciple. *Pointing the finger* and *the blame game* have been around a long time, since the first couple arrived on the scene in Eden. And human pride and lack of repentance have frustrated God's plans ever since.

Amos pointed us to a better way as God's people. Sincere humility in the presence of God and other people, genuine openness to the conviction of the Holy Spirit, ready willingness to face shortcomings, renewed commitment to be more faithful as a Jesus follower tomorrow than we were today—those are the attitudes God uses to lead us to deeper maturity in Christ.

We might do well to revisit the old lyrics of the spiritual: "Not my mother, not my father, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."² Amos preached the far-reaching, all-encompassing judgment of God upon sin—no exceptions. There is none righteous; no, not one.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Before class, prepare a markerboard with two columns, one saying “Occupations” and the other “Messages God Wants People to Know Today” As people arrive, greet everyone. Have them write their primary occupation on the markerboard under “Occupations.”
2. Ask: *What are some messages you are reasonably certain God wants people in our world to know?* List answers on the markerboard. (Such as these: God loves us; God gave his Son Jesus to die on a cross to pay for our sin; God doesn’t like sin but loves the sinner; God offers forgiveness.)
3. Summarize (or have someone summarize) “Introducing Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah: Calling for Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness” from the *Study Guide*. Refer also to the two charts in the *Study Guide* to enable students to position this study of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah in the sweep of biblical history and events. Continue introducing the study by pointing out that this lesson is the first of three from the Book of Amos. State that Amos 1:1 and 7:14–15 reveal what we know about this prophet. (Have a volunteer read these verses.) Ask: *What do these verses tell us about Amos?* (a shepherd; not a “professional” prophet; cared for fig trees) Say: *In today’s terms, Amos was more a layperson than clergy.* (Add “shepherd” to the list of “Occupations”). Say: *God uses all kinds of people to deliver His message. As we look at God’s word today, be thinking of ways God may want to use you.*

Guide Bible Study

4. Ask: *What do we do when we try to get someone else’s attention? Let’s list several.* (For example, give hand signal, yell, tap shoulder, call name.) Ask, *If God were trying to get our attention, how might he do*

it? Encourage responses. Read Amos 1:2. Ask: *How do we know God was trying to get Israel's attention?* (He roared; used nature.)

5. State: *Amos was delivering the message that God told him to share.* Enlist people to read aloud Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1. Say: *Amos called out the surrounding nations for their outrageous behavior against vulnerable members of society.* (Show locations on Bible map, if possible. Point out that these nations *surrounded* Judah and Israel.) Suggest that the Israelites probably enjoyed hearing God's judgment toward these other nations, because they believed, as Israelites, that they were God's chosen people and were exempt. The Israelites may have shouted *Amen* and *Preach on* to this series of Amos's messages. It would be similar today to a preacher from America pointing out the wrongs in Mexico or Canada.
6. Say: *Amos 2:4–5 reveals God's judgment against Judah. The Northern Israelites would not have had a problem about this word from God either. It was against their southern neighbor.* (Read verses.) Ask: *What were the southern tribes of Israel doing that God despised?* (Allow for response.) Say: *While Amos's hearers may have been comfortable up to then, the situation was about to change.*
7. Have the class read silently 2:6–16, looking for the charges against Israel. Ask: *What did you find? What was God's decision towards them?* (Allow for responses.) Explain the verses as seems helpful using information in the *Study Guide* and in "Bible Comments" in this *Teaching Guide*.

Encourage Application

8. Ask: *In what ways are the actions of the Israelites long ago similar to actions we see today? In other words, do you see any similar injustices in our society, and if so, how?* (Allow for answers.) Point out that we tend to consider ourselves exceptions from God's judgment.
9. Say: *Amos was an ordinary follower of God who listened, acted, and shared God's message when instructed to do so.* Ask, *Have you known someone who was called by God to do something similar? What did they do?* (Encourage responses. Be prepared to share an example of your own.)

10. Say: *Just as God held people accountable in Amos’s day, God holds us accountable too.* Point back to the messages that God wants people to know today. Ask: *How do they apply to us? What are ways God can use us to deliver his message?* (Discuss.)

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Lead the class to briefly give suggestions how the following Christians could be used by God to share his love and message. Choose from the following or add your own:
 - A successful businessperson
 - Someone of low income
 - An adult with a high school diploma
 - A preacher with advanced theological degrees
 - A professional motivational speaker
 - A person who points to God, not self
 - A person who acts, in spite of fears

Ask: *Of these we’ve mentioned, who would you vote as “the most likely to be used by God” and why?* (Allow for response. There is no single correct answer.)

2. Say: *In today’s study, we will look at a person God used to deliver a message of accountability. We will also look for God’s expectations of accountability for us.*

Guide Bible Study

3. Refer to and summarize “Introducing Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah: Calling for Justice, Mercy, and Faithfulness” from the *Study Guide*. Refer also to the two charts in the *Study Guide* to enable students to position this study in the sweep of biblical history and events. Continue introducing the study by pointing out that this lesson is the first of three from the Book of Amos.

4. Have a volunteer read Amos 1:1; 7:14–15. Say: *God sent a messenger to the people of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. How does the Bible describe this messenger? What do we know about him?* (His name is Amos. He was from Tekoa, a small town ten miles south of Jerusalem and six miles south of Bethlehem. He was not a professional prophet. By occupation, he was a shepherd and also tended sycamore-fig trees.) Say: *In some ways, you could say Amos was as an ordinary person; he could be like any one of us.* Ask: *What did God expect from Amos?* (to deliver God’s message)
5. Ask: *What sounds give you cause for alarm?* (siren, scream, cry, alarm clock, horn, thunder) *In Amos 1:2, what two sounds are causes for alarm to the people of Israel?* (a lion’s roar; a storm was coming) *What was God trying to do?* (gain the attention of the straying Israelites)
6. Assign the following verses to be read: 1:3, 6, 9, 13; 2:1. Say: *In Amos 1:3—2:5 God pronounced judgment on Israel’s enemies, one nation at a time. There is a pattern to the messages. Listen for this pattern and the accusations.* (Have volunteers read verses). Say:

Each judgment begins with “For three transgressions . . . and for four.” God was saying that three sins were more than enough for God’s judgment, but four sins were completely over the top. Basically God said, “I’m not putting up with this nation’s behavior anymore.” God then described the sins of the nation and pronounced judgment on them. What were some of the accusations? (Allow for responses.) Continue, Since these nations were Israel’s enemies, how do you think the Israelites received Amos’s message? (Amen, preach on; it’s about time.) Say: Next Amos turned the focus away from Israel’s enemies. The message to Israel would be the longest of God’s judgment messages.

7. Have a volunteer read Amos 2:6–8. Ask: *How could you describe these sins in modern terms?* (Possible answers: seeing other people as worthless, 2:6; no respect or regard for vulnerable, needy people, 2:6; arrogance, 2:6; abuse of power, 2:6; not caring about those in need, 2:7; sexual abuse, 2:7; playing church, 2:8; turning our back on God, 2:12.)

8. Have a volunteer read Amos 2:13–16. Say: *Those are pretty harsh words from the One we consider a loving God.*

Encourage Application

9. Read or summarize the small article, “To Discipline or Not to Discipline,” in the *Study Guide*. Ask, *As a loving parent, how would you have responded to the boys?* (Encourage response). Say: *As God’s children, God has expectations for us and holds us accountable for our actions.*
10. Have the following verses read aloud: Matthew 7:3; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Hebrews 9:27. Ask, *What do these verses say to us about God’s expectations for today?* (Encourage discussion.)

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3, 7–13, and the Easter lesson are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.
2. “Standin’ in the Need of Prayer.” African-American spiritual.
<http://nethymnal.org/htm/s/t/a/standinp.htm>. Accessed 11/3/11.