

February 9, 2025

Return: I Desire Mercy Not Sacrifice

Hosea 6:1-6

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...I know the last time we were together we discussed a heavy topic as we considered God's message to the Prophet Hosea in chs. 1-3 when God asked him to marry a woman named Gomer whom he knew would be unfaithful to him as a "real life" example of what Israel's sin and idolatry was to God, the same as committing spiritual adultery. After his wife left him for another man and had become enslaved to him, God instructed Hosea to go after his wife and buy her back, to redeem her and to love her again, which he does, demonstrating God's faithfulness to us in that while we are unfaithful to him, God sent forth his son to pay the price of redemption and to buy us back making it possible to enter into a right relationship with God.

What's interesting, is that we don't know what happens to this marriage going forward. We're not told that they live happily ever after, but because of the imagery that is presented in the book, namely God's faithfulness toward us, we can safely assume that their marriage continued on as an example of the our security in him.

Now as chs. 1-3 give us the real-life message of God to his people, the rest of the book is the spoken message that God speaks through the prophet Hosea. In chs. 4-5, Hosea condemns the nation of Israel for their widespread spiritual infidelity and idolatry, particularly criticizing the priests and leaders for their lack of knowledge and failure to guide the people towards God, leading to a society consumed by immorality and corruption, ultimately resulting in God's coming judgment due to their rejection of his covenant.

However, in many ways, God's grace is what the book of Hosea is about. Although Israel is consistently unfaithful and turns to idols for help instead of turning to their God, his heart is broken and he longs for their true return. Israel's problem was that they didn't take sin seriously enough and so their repentance wasn't genuine, and even at times when it was, it didn't last. So after calling out the people, especially the leaders, who had led the people away, we arrive at Hosea ch.6. If you have your Bibles, turn with me to Hosea ch. 6. [Read Hosea 6:1-6]

In vs. 1-3, Hosea calls the people to repentance and to turn back to God for healing. And these verses are linked to the end of the ch. 5 in a few different ways. First, in ch.5, the Israelites "had gone to Assyria" for help instead of God, another example of their unfaithfulness, but here they are commanded to come back to the Lord. We'll be talking about this more specifically in a couple weeks as we look at how Israel continued to look for help in all the wrong places instead of to God, the only one who could save them. And don't we all do the same. We exhaust all other avenues before we turn to God in desperation?

Related, and also in ch. 5, Hosea points out the Assyrian king was unable to "heal" God's people of their wound in 5:13, but in our text we're told that God would heal them. Next, in ch.5, the LORD said he would "tear Israel to pieces," as a lion with its prey,

speaking of his coming judgment. But here in this call to repentance, we are reminded that God has torn the people, but it was for the purpose of binding their wounds and healing them. Finally, in 5:15, God said he would withdraw his presence to cause his people to seek his face, and here, in ch. 6, the people are called to press on to know the LORD and to seek him.

And this all sounds great, doesn't it? A call to repent to heal the wounds of the nation. To seek the Lord and remedy their lack of knowledge that they were called out for in the previous chapters. To call upon the him with the same fervor as the people of Nineveh with hopes that God would relent of his anger and spare them of his judgment. But, the problem is again, their repentance wasn't genuine and they never addressed the root cause of their sin, a wayward heart. Their actions continually proved that all they wanted to do was to fix their circumstances, but they wanted to continue to live their lives as they pleased.

This has always been our problem with repentance. We don't take sin serious enough. We don't actually recognize what an affront it is to a Holy God, and all we really want to do is avoid the consequences of our sins, all the while still reveling in them. But, when we truly repent, then we turn from our sin and follow after our loving Father who is there to bind up and heal the wounds. May God help us all.

We see God's response to this faux repentance, if you will, in vs. 4-6. [Read vs. 4-6] God's first response is a frustration with Israel's lack of devotion. You can hear the frustration in God's voice, can't you? 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist, G. Campbell Morgan, mentions how startling this question is when he spoke on this passage, saying, "I can understand a man saying, What shall I do? But... this is not the cry of the human soul seeking after God. It is the cry of God seeking after the human soul."

The Lord is exasperated at the people's inability to acknowledge their sins and truly return to him. And, because they were ungrateful of his blessings, they failed to love him in return and, instead, went after and worshipped other gods.

God says in vs. 4, "Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears." You see, they had declared their love, and they even showed it, but only for a brief moment. Then they were on to their next sin, their next love affair with another god. Like us, it was not that there was no faithfulness at all, just barely any at all. And this cycle of loyalty, disloyalty and punishment had been Israel's M.O. since the days of the Judges. [more] But this type of spiritual rollercoaster that isn't what God desires for his people. He wants the constant growth towards spiritual maturity in our lives as we continually grow in our relationship with him.

Now, there is a striking contrast between God's love, which comes like the dawn, or rises like the sun, that we read back in vs. 3, and Israel's love, which disappears like the morning dew here in vs. 4. The word translated as "love" here is the Hebrew word "hesed." This word is loaded with meaning and it describes steadfast love or covenant faithfulness. It's the kind of love that God has for us and that we are supposed to have toward him. So, it is not the presence of sin that angers the Lord, although that's certainly part of it, but it's the absence of "hesed," a true, covenantal love for him.

And so, next, God pronounces judgement through the prophets in vs. 5. Throughout history God had sent his people prophets to turn them back to him. The priests, who were

supposed to be the spiritual leaders and mediators between God and the people had failed them, and now the prophets have been sent to them with God's message to repent and return to the Lord.

And the prophets would come, wielding the Word like a sword, bringing words of judgment and hope. The author of the Book of Hebrews would later write, "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." (Heb. 4:12)

Just as a surgeon's scalpel makes precision cuts in order to bring healing, so God's Word penetrates even deeper, into our very souls, and able to judge the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts. It exposes our motives behind our actions.

And so, God had sent Israel the prophets. Unfortunately, for Hosea's audience, the word sent to them was more judgment than transformation. And instead of listening and obeying God's word and coming to true repentance, they naively thought they could continue their religious practices and that would appease God. But, Hosea 6:6 says...[Read]

This brings us to our final point this morning, God desires mercy, or steadfast love, over outward signs of religion. In reaction to the luke-warmness and up and down commitment of Israel, and their false reliance on their works of sacrifices instead of reliance on the God, the Lord lays it all down and makes it plain for them to see. It is not that God wanted to do away with the sacrificial system (that would come later), but he is illustrating the greater importance of what goes on in the heart. As God looked at their multiple sacrifices he saw no "hesed," no covenantal love, and no real "acknowledgement" of God.

The scriptures tell us numerous times in the Old Testament that sacrifices were meaningless, even offensive to God, unless they were offered out of a heart of love that demonstrated obedience to God's Word (1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:11-17; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8). Jesus twice quoted this passage of Hosea to the religious leaders of his day (Matthew 9:13 and 12:7). Israel had brought animals for sacrifice, but they never brought themselves as a living sacrifice. They missed what God really wants, a deep and close relationship with Him.

God wanted steadfastness and mercy over sacrifice and faithfulness over formality. What the people were doing, practicing rituals without real devotion, was meaninglessness and hypocritical. And Hosea was merely recognizing that without a heart of steadfast love behind it, all of our religious acts are worth nothing.

So, think about that as you worship today and every day. Is your heart truly engaged or are you just going through the motions? When you sing, are you singing from a heart that is deeply in love with Jesus, deeply grateful for all that he has done for you? Is your mind engaged during times of prayer and the reading of God's Word? Do we give of our time and resources, including your tithes and offerings, not out of obligation or some type of "pay for blessing" deal we think we're getting from God or are we giving to God with a thankful heart for him to use our gifts to the building of his Kingdom. This is what God looked for in Israel and Judah, and what Jesus looks for in us today. He wants us to worship Him "in spirit and truth."

I'll close with this. Henry and Richard Blackaby, in their *Experiencing God Day-by-Day* devotional, had this to say on this topic, "No amount of activity for God will ever take the place of a heart that is right with Him. Through the ages God's people have been persuaded that they could please Him through their service and their offerings, regardless of their heart condition. King Saul offered generous sacrifices, hoping God would overlook his disobedience (1 Samuel 15:22-23). David may have assumed that after all he had done on God's behalf, God would overlook his sin (2 Samuel 12:7-15). Ananias and Sapphira thought that their generous gift to the church would compensate for their deceitfulness (Acts 5:1-11). Paul was certainly one who had thought his zealousness would please God. After his conversion, however, he concluded that even if he had faith to remove mountains, gave all he had to feed the poor, and offered his body to be burned for the sake God, and yet had a heart that was not right, it would all be for nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-13)."

We are all susceptible to the same misunderstanding as all of these people were. We can be deceived into assuming God is more interested in what we can do for him than he is in the condition of our heart. But his desire is that we devote ourselves to knowing him and loving him with all of our hearts.

And so, in our text today Hosea calls out to the people to return to the Lord, to the heart of true worship, and to acknowledge him as the only one who is worthy of our praise. Let us not be like the Israelites and continue to think that by going through the outward religious motions of going to church and acting like "Christians" is somehow going to appease God and be an adequate substitute for a real relationship with him. Let us repent and return to God with a true heart of worship and out of that will flow the good works that he has called us to do. God has said, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. Let's take him at his word. Let's pray.