

God Loves the Unfaithful (2)

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to Hosea chapter 3 as we explore how God loves the unfaithful.

God loves the unfaithful. Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

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Alec, you're not allowed to answer. Where does that quote come from? Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Thus begins a book which changed the shape of European history called the Institutes of Christian Religion, written by the French reformer John Calvin.

Well done, Vernon. There are two parts to any true and solid wisdom, knowing God, knowing ourselves. Knowing ourselves isn't enough. We must also know God, and in knowing God, we come to know ourselves also. Is any among us wise?

[1 : 28] Then let's train for that two-part knowledge, knowing God and knowing ourselves. Now, in this short chapter, Isaiah 3, we're presented with both parts of wisdom, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves. It's actually a really good way to read any passage in the Bible. What does this passage teach me about God? So I'm talking about our own personal reading of the Bible. What does this passage teach me about God? And what does it teach me about me? And what this chapter teaches us is that the heart of God is filled with love and faithfulness, but that the heart of man is filled with idolatry and unfaithfulness.

But even more, and this is the glorious pulse of this passage, the love of God for us overcomes and overwhelms our unfaithfulness to Him. Hosea 3 offers wisdom to all who will listen.

In this chapter, we learn two things. First, the heart of man is a factory of idols, idols. And second, the heart of God is filled with love. First of all then, the heart of man is a factory of idols. So this expression, the heart of man is a perpetual factory of idols, was also coined by John Calvin in his Institutes of Christian Religion. Because in his day, blacksmiths crafted statues of the saints and of the Virgin Mary. Day after day, these blacksmiths churned out more and more of these idols. But for John Calvin, most of these most industrious blacksmiths could not compare with the capacity of the human heart to manufacture and worship its own idols. Calvin's not talking about statues of the saints and of the Virgin Mary or the statues of foreign gods. Just because we as Christians don't have these statues in our houses and bow down to them doesn't mean to say that we're any less idolatrous. This is where Hosea comes into its own in this relentless critique of idolatry. We might think that because we do not worship statues and idols, that Hosea has got nothing to say to us, and that this is all irrelevant. But when we take into account what Calvin says, that our hearts are perpetual factories of idols, Hosea comes into its own, and we begin to know ourselves and to know the God who loves the unfaithful.

So what then is idolatry? What is idolatry? And this is important, we all listen to this. Idolatry is when we put anything before God in our lives.

When we put anything before God in our lives. The first commandment reads like this, I am the Lord your God who brought you up out of Egypt. You shall have no other gods before me.

[4 : 49] Anything we put before God is an idol. The reason we as Christians don't take idolatry seriously enough is that we think it's a breach of the second commandment and not the first. The second commandment being, you shall not make for yourself a carved image. You shall not bow down to them. Now last time I checked, I don't think we have any carved images of saints or foreign gods in this church. So we've ticked off the idolatry commandment, right? But idolatry isn't about making images as much as it's about putting other things before God in our lives. It is more the target of the first commandment, not the second. Anything that comes before God in our lives is an idol. And Calvin says our hearts are perpetual factories of idols, of things that we put before God in

our minds and our affections and our hearts. In Hosea,

God is telling us that to put anything before Him is spiritual adultery. It's as serious a sin as that of a husband committing adultery and of being unfaithful to his wife.

To put anything before God, anything at all, whether it's a bad thing or a good thing, is to break the first commandment and forsake the God who saved us through the death of His Son, Jesus.

So, in Hosea 1, the prophet is commanded to marry an adulterous woman called Gomer. She marries him, she bears three children to him, but then rather than remain faithful to him, returns to her disgusting adultery. A heartbroken and humiliated Hosea is then told in verse 1 of chapter 3, Go again and love a woman who is loved by another man and is an adulteress.

Through the prophet, God is showing His idolatrous and unfaithful people Israel that despite their spiritual unfaithfulness, He still loves them. They humiliate Him. And if I may use this term with reverence, they break His heart, and yet He will not, He cannot stop loving them.

[7 : 31] Gomer committed adultery with another man, but the idolatry of Israel is far more widespread. They put anything and everything before God in their lives. They talk in verse 1 about cakes of raisins. These are offerings made to foreign gods. Because at the time of writing, Israel wasn't just worshiping the Lord. It was worshiping the gods of the nations around them. But there's also talk later in the chapter about kings and princes and sacrifices and pillars and ephods and household gods. Now, some of these things, once again, are associated with the worship of foreign gods. So, you have pillars and household gods. But some of them are good things, kings and princes and sacrifices and ephods, which are priestly garments. The point is this, Hosea is saying, such is the idolatrous nature of our sinful hearts that we can put even good things before God in our lives and serve them rather than Him. God gave His people kings to rule over them. But the people began to worship their king and not the God who had given them.

God gave His people a sacrificial system through which they may draw near to Him. But the people began to put that sacrificial system before God in their lives. Idolatry, you see, takes the good gift God gives us and bows down to worship the gift rather than the God who gives the gift to us.

This is where Hosea is coming into his own in his ruthless critique of how we can take God's good gifts and put them before God in our minds, affections, and hearts. Now, I don't guess there's one person here this evening who was hedging his bets between different religions. So, I'm going to suggest that raisin cakes, pillars, and household gods aren't really our thing. What then are the good gifts from God that we may turn into idols and bow down to worship them, pursuing satisfaction in them rather than in the gospel of Jesus Christ? I'm going to take a couple of examples. And I'm saying these things as much to myself as much as I'm saying them to anyone else. I'm being very pointed.

God has given each one of us intelligence, ability, and opportunity. These are good gifts from Him. And many of us have built on them to develop good and fulfilling careers. God calls us to work and provide for our families and for our church. And by our careers, we're taking advantage of His good gifts to us. And that's good. But what happens when we begin to put our careers before God in our minds, affections, and wills? When what ultimately drives our decision-making isn't the glory of God, but our career advancement? When our happiness depends more upon how we're getting on at the office and less on our relationship with Christ? When we begin to pursue our careers with more vigor than we do our relationship with God. And ministry in this respect is a kind of career, so it's an easy trap for ministers to fall into as well. What happens when our minds, affections, and wills are more concerned with our career advancement than our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ? At this point, our careers have become idols, and we're committing spiritual adultery. Okay, let's take another example. God did not call any of us to go it alone as Christians.

[11 : 56] He calls us into the community of the church. It's a good thing when we as Christians love other Christians as a family, and we help each other grow in the faith. We invest in the life of the church.

We devote our time and our talents and our tithes for the good of the church. But what happens when we begin to put the church before God in our minds, affections, and wills?

When we're not really bothered whether God is present with us when we worship, just as long as we're together. What happens when success as a church becomes more important to us than faithfulness to God and fruitfulness for God? What happens when our spiritual lives are so wrapped up in the life of the church to the exclusion of our personal relationship with Jesus Christ? We've taken a good gift from God, and we've turned it into an idol. We've put it before God in our

affections. At this point, the church has become our idol, and we're committing spiritual adultery. You know what the tragic and pathetic thing about our idolatry is from this passage? Let's go back to verse 1. The children of Israel sold their salvation for the price of a cake of raisins. Isn't that pathetic? Derek Hidner, famous Old Testament commentator, on this passage he writes this, God loves Israel to the uttermost, while Israel gives her heart to, of all things, cakes of raisins. [13:40] Tell me, is this true wisdom? That we would forfeit the love of God who sent his son to die on the cross to take away all our sins for the sake of a fruit scone?

Because that's how silly it is. Our hearts are perpetual factories of idols, and every one of them is a pathetic fruit scone compared to the infinite love of God.

Is it really worth sacrificing Christ upon the altar of our careers, or even our church? Perhaps now we can see that Hosea's critique of idolatry is far more relevant than perhaps previously we had thought.

And as Christians, we're far more prone to spiritual adultery than we think. What's the application for us? It is to seriously and prayerfully ask ourselves the question, Are there things in my life that I'm putting before God, that I could do without God, but I cannot do without them?

Are there things in my life that I'm putting before God, such that I could do without God, but I could not do without them?

[15:06] Perhaps it's a case for us of going back to David's prayer in Psalm 139, 23 and 24. Search me, O God. Know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts.

See if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. The heart of man is a factory of idols. The heart of God, secondly, is filled with love.

The heart of God is filled with love. You know, if you were to approach the book of Isaiah from the perspective of what it tells us about sinful and idolatrous human nature, it's rather depressing reading.

It's depressing because it's close to the bone. To one extent or another, if we know ourselves as we really are, we're all idolaters in need of God's wake-up call to dependence and faith.

But if we approach Hosea from the perspective of God's love for the unfaithful, rather than it being depressing, it is full of passion and hope.

[16:16] For though we may at times give up on ourselves, God will never give up on us. Our hearts are factories of idols, and our eyes are roving for other lovers.

But the heart of God is filled with love for us, and His eyes are fixed upon us. The overwhelming love of God for the unfaithful is demonstrated in four ways in this chapter.

It is painful, costly, determined, and Christ-like. This is the way God loves me, even though I do not love Him that way.

It is a painful love, first of all. It's a painful love. Hosea had married unfaithful Gomer, and she had borne him three children. He loved her. But she, true to her nature, returned to adultery.

She loved another man. How much it must have pained Hosea to have his wife playing the adulteress. We can imagine what his friends must have said to him when he told them of Gomer's unfaithfulness.

[17:32] We told you so, Hosea. You should never have loved her. We knew that she would never be faithful to you. But then, to add insult to injury, Hosea returns to her.

She has broken his heart, but now he humiliates himself by going back to her and loving her again. He has every right to leave her to her own fate. But he's told by God, go back and love her again.

Endure the pain and humiliation of more adultery and further rejection. God's love for us is so vast that endures all the pain and humiliation of our spiritual adultery.

We've got other spiritual lovers, and yet he loves us still. Such painful and humiliating love. One can almost imagine Satan accusing God and saying, you still love them?

That bunch of pathetic adulterers who'd rather have a fruit scone than you? Better you move on to others who would love you back, God. But our God is immovable and unshakable in his love for us.

[18:51] For as we read in Hosea 3 verse 1, The Lord loves the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods. If only we could see the number of things we put before God in our lives as Christians, we'd wonder, how can he still love me?

But he does. No matter how many fruit scones we eat, he does. Secondly, it's a costly love.

It's a costly love. Hosea had married Gomer, but she'd forsaken him and attached herself to another lover. We don't know the precise details of how it came to be, but it appears that she had somehow

sold herself into some kind of slavery to him.

She'd become the possession of another man, even though technically she was still married to Hosea. To get her back, to love her again, Hosea had to buy her.

Or as we would call it, to redeem her. For after all, that's what redemption means, to buy something back. And so we read that's what Hosea did.

[20 : 07] He bought her back for the price of 15 shekels of silver and a homer and a lefech of barley. Now, we don't know exactly to what these measures correspond, but what we do know is that it was a vast sum.

It cost Hosea dear to redeem his unfaithful, promiscuous, adulterous wife. By her unfaithfulness, she had sold herself into slavery.

She had got herself into the mess she was in, but Hosea was determined to demonstrate his love for her in this. While she was yet a slave, and while she was still unfaithful to him, he paid the highest price for her freedom.

Now, of course, the New Testament application is very clear. Hosea bought his wife back with silver and cereal, but God redeemed us by the lifeblood of his one and only Son on the cross.

He paid the highest price to redeem us from the slavery of our unfaithfulness, from the awful mess we'd gotten ourselves into. Paul tells us God demonstrated his love for us in this.

[21 : 24] While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Our hearts, still factories of idols, were redeemed by the blood of the Son of God, whose heart is filled with love for us.

As the hymn says, What a love! What a cost! We stand forgiven at the cross. It's a love that's costly enough, surely, to deserve our faith, our lives.

There are times in lives, are there not? Times in our lives when we might wonder whether God really loves us that are tough times.

We've all had them, I'm sure. Where we wonder, Does God really love me? Because from our circumstances, it seems there's so little evidence of God's love around.

As we look around us, perhaps we despair, but then we look back to the cross, for God won our redemption through the blood of his own Son.

[22 : 32] Behold the sufferings of the Lamb of God, and we doubt his love no more. For who else other than God could love us so much as to give his only Son for us?

Third, it's a determined love. A determined love. The love of God is jealous.

He could love another, but he's fixed his heart on us. Yes, us. Just like Hosea loved an unfaithful Gomer and hood only, so God's love for us is jealous.

In Hosea 3, 4, God describes how for a time he's going to remove from his people all the idols to which they bow down and which they worship and serve, both good things and bad. God's going to take them all away so that all that's left is him and them and nothing in between.

This is a reference to how God historically is going to use the Assyrian invasion to sweep away everything that Israel holds dear. The Assyrian army will kill Israel's princes and kings, will destroy Israel's sacrifices, pillars, ephods, and household gods.

[23 : 54] God's love for them is so dramatically intense that he will take away from them all those idols upon which they rely and which they serve. He will not abandon them to their fate.

He is determined that his love should be requited so he'll take away all that idols until all that's left is him and them and nothing in between.

Let's go back to these examples of how we put other things before God in our lives. God is so determined to love us that if we're losing a grip on him due to these idols, he'll take them away so that all that's left is him and us and nothing in between.

We talked a little bit about putting our careers before God. If we should make of our careers a God, he'll take them away so that all that's left is him and us and nothing in between.

We talk about putting our church before him. You know, if we should put our church leaders, if we should make of them idols, he'll take them away so that all that's left is him and us and nothing in between.

[25 : 24] How many charismatic and gifted leaders of whom we made idols have tragically fallen away? It's tragic, but could it be that we who followed them were making too much of them to the expense of God himself and that eventually he removed them so that it was him and us and nothing in between.

The point's this. I remember someone saying this to me once and it's never left me. It is only when Jesus is all we have that we realize that Jesus is all we need.

It is only when Jesus is all we have when there's nothing between us and God except Jesus that we realize that Jesus is all we need. The love of God will bring us to a place in our lives where we realize that.

There may be some of us here right now in that position. God has made us destitute of all the things that we once put before him. Our careers, our relationships, our health even.

Could it be that God has removed these things from us in order that we might return to him and realize that Jesus is all we really need?

[26 : 51] Last, the love of God for the unfaithful is a Christ-like love. A Christ-like love. As with all the Hebrew prophets, the ultimate fulfillment of their prophecies isn't located in the Old Testament but in the New.

In verse 5, God says, afterward, the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king and they shall come in fear to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

Now, as we know, as a matter of simple historical fact that David was dead by this point, he would never rise again and that the Assyrians destroyed the nation of Israel and that it never recovered.

So, the fulfillment of this prophecy isn't in the Old Testament, it can only be in the New Testament with Jesus Christ as the descendant of David, the king of God's beloved people.

This verse is pointing to the way in which the Lord Jesus Christ shall reign as king and head of his church and he'll gather to himself a people who shall come in fear to God and worship him and him alone.

[27 : 57] The love of God is shaped like a cross and it's concentrated in a person, the Lord Jesus Christ. The love of God shines from Christ in every direction, drawing us to him and calling us to him until all that's left is us and him and nothing else between because there is no room for idols in a heart which is filled with Jesus Christ.

Throughout Hosea, we might say that God loves the unfaithful but that love is shaped like, concentrated in and personified by his son, Jesus Christ, the Jesus who redeemed us from the slavery of our sin.

John Calvin said, as Vernon reminded us, our wisdom insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom consists almost entirely of two parts, the knowledge of God and of ourselves.

Who are we? Our hearts are factories of idols. Who is God? The God who is filled with Christ-shaped love.

Would we be understanding and wise? The pulse of this passage is the love of God for our unfaithful people. That is wisdom, friends.

[29 : 31] That from our unfaithfulness we move to God and we put our faith and trust in Him. Let us pray.

Our God and Father we confess that so often we have made idols out to be carved sculptures to saints and to other gods and because in our tradition we don't have statues and pictures to which we bow down and worship, we've absolved ourselves from the sin of adultery.

We've said, well I'm not an idolater because I don't bow down to a statue and I don't have pictures in my church while all the time forgetting that idolatry is a matter of the heart and putting things before you.

Lord, will you show us the idols that we worship whether it's our careers, whether it's our relationships, whether it's our wealth or our health or our prosperity or of our families, good things or yes, even bad things.

Lord, fill us once again with a sense of your intense Christ-like love for us. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[31 : 03] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.