

God Loves the Unfaithful (3)

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 00] And turn again with me, please, this evening to Isaiah 6. This will be the last of our studies into the book of Hosea.

The message of Hosea in every chapter is basically the same. Like a good teacher, he reiterates the message of how God loves the unfaithful.

So over these three sermons, I do hope that I've given you a flavor of the book of Hosea and its central themes. Come, Hosea says, let us return to the Lord.

Does anyone here keep a diary? Diaries are wonderful things for many reasons, but one of the best things about keeping a diary is that it helps us to remember past experiences so that we may learn from them.

Some of these experiences may have been very hurtful, but we learn from them how to keep going and to grow through them, both as people and as Christians.

[1 : 08] Sporadically, I keep a diary, and it records for me times when I felt very close to God and also times when I felt very far away from Him. The Old Testament is the diary of God's people, recording for our benefit all their experiences so that we can learn from them.

In common with us, sometimes they were close to God and sometimes they were very far away from Him. The ministry of the prophet Hosea records their experiences during a period where the people of Israel were far away from God were far away from God.

Like an unfaithful wife, they were unfaithful to the God who loved them. But if we read this part of Israel's diary very closely, we learn that despite all their unfaithfulness, God still loves them.

And learning this, we take courage. Because even when we feel far away from God, and even when our love for Him is cold, we'd be assured that His love for us burns as hot as ever.

He is still our faithful husband, even if we're His unfaithful wife. Well, these verses, Hosea 6 verses 1 through 6, are an important entry in Israel's diary, recording as they do for us, God's faithful call to return to Him, followed by the faithless response of God's people.

[2 : 54] I wonder tonight whether some of us are where the faithless Israelites were, far away from God, our love for Him as cold as ice.

In this passage of Scripture, the Holy Spirit of God is calling upon us to return to Him and to experience for ourselves refreshing showers of His blessed presence.

The first entry in Israel's diary in Hosea 6 is a faithful call from verses 1 through 3, and then secondly, a faithless response from verse 4 to 6.

A faithful call and a faithless response. But it all ends well, trust me. First of all then, from verse 1 through 3, a faithful call.

In Matthew 18, 21, we read these words. Then Peter came up to Him, that's Jesus, and said, Lord, how often will my brother sin against me and I forgive him?

[4 : 04] As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.

Now, the basis on which Jesus said this was that God had forgiven Israel for their unfaithfulness not seven times, but seventy times seven times and more.

The diary of Israel is the history of their unfaithfulness, of how they, like Hosea's adulterous wife, had turned away from worshiping the Lord to serve the gods of the surrounding nations.

But for all that they had not loved Him, He still loved them. And so once again, the prophet Hosea, through him, God appeals to His people to return to Him and experience for themselves His deep love for them.

In these verses, through Hosea, the Holy Spirit is appealing to these people of Israel to turn away from their backsliding and to do two things. First, to return to the Lord, and second, to know the

Lord.

[5 : 25] He's appealing to them, first of all, to return to the Lord, to return to the Lord. Hosea stands as the preacher and representative of Israel as he makes this appeal to the people, come, let us return to the Lord.

The precise word return here may also be translated as repent or even be converted. It represents a diametric change of direction in life.

Whereas once we were going north, now we're going south. Whereas once we were going to the right, now we're going to the left. Whereas once we were going down, we're now going up. And whereas once the people of Israel were turning away from the Lord, they're now being called to about face and turn toward Him.

Whereas once they were running away from Him, now they're being called to run toward Him. In many ways, Jesus' parable of the prodigal son is a worked example of these verses.

Whereas once the prodigal son did everything in his power to get away from his father, now having realized how wrong he had been, he did everything in his power to go back to his father.

[6 : 39] The prodigal son changed direction. He reached that far off country and for a while he enjoyed himself. But then times got tough and he made plans to return, realizing that all the idols of wealth and pleasure he'd been chasing after were empty fantasies compared to the reality of loving and being loved by his father.

even now, though Israel had turned away from the Lord to worship the idols of the surrounding nations, he is lovingly calling them to return to Him.

And he calls to them through the situations they're facing. Isaiah says, I mean, Hosea says, He's torn us that He may heal us or He tears us that He may heal us so that they may return to God for healing.

Like that prodigal son, they're reduced to feeding pigs and longing to eat the husks that even the pigs won't eat, but only so that they may realize how much they are loved by their father.

They have become spiritually dead, but only so they may return to God for spiritual resurrection and new life. This is the faithful call of the Holy Spirit through the mouth of Hosea, calling upon God's people to forsake their unfaithfulness and to return to the Lord.

[8 : 11] It's a call which every church which is faithful to the call of God upon them must issue from its pulpits. It is the faithless church which rather than calling upon people to forsake their unfaithfulness, confirms them in their unfaithfulness and tells them that it's okay to pursue lifestyles which provoke God and go against His Word.

Return to God. Change direction. That's the constant call of the gospel. Repent and believe the good news. It's a call which the German reformer Martin Luther knew he needed to hear, so he famously said that he preached the gospel to himself every day.

Because even in the space of 24 hours, we can grow so cold to God, we need to constantly remind ourselves to return to Him. When was the last time we took ourselves in hand and said, return to God?

What's God been doing in our lives recently to bring us to our senses? In what ways has He torn us that He might heal us?

How has He struck us that He might bind us up? Are we listening to His constant and loving call to return to Him? Return to the Lord.

[9 : 38] That's the first aspect. But then also, know the Lord. Know the Lord. You know, they say that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are very different, but the more you get to know the whole Bible, you realize how false that dichotomy is.

In John 17, in His great high priestly prayer, Jesus prays these words, and this is eternal life that they may know you and Jesus Christ who be sent.

And Isaiah 6.3 strikes exactly the same note. The most important thing in all of life is not merely knowing about God, but knowing God.

Here we read these words of appeal in verse 3. And don't we just want to put up our hands and say, that's me. I'm in. Let us know.

Let us press on to know the Lord. Not just let us know, but let us press on to know the Lord. The famous Christian author A.W. Tozer wrote a book with the wonderful title, The Pursuit of God.

[10 : 54] That's the force of the words Hosea is using here. Let us pursue knowing God. The Apostle Paul would later express it this way, I count everything else lost compared to the

surpassing excellence of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.

Here we've got the most amazing invitation that a sinful, unfaithful, idolatrous humanity may know God. This is the end point and purpose of our lives as Christians, that we may know Him even as He knows us.

The word know here is used in the context of Hosea in the same way that a husband knows his wife. not just an intellectual connection, but emotional, spiritual, physical.

It's a very intimate word that we should forsake other lovers and love the God who loves us. And this is true satisfaction that we should lose ourselves in Him, being endlessly satisfied with His glorious excellencies and His majestic love.

Like a whirlpool draws everything into its vortex so when we begin to pursue God, we find ourselves being drawn deeper into the beauties and the delights of who God really is.

[12 : 30] How's our pursuit of knowing God today? How hard are we working to know Him? Are we pressing on in our knowledge of Him?

Or are we being distracted by the things of the world around us? It's so little wonder we find little pleasure in knowing God when our hearts and minds are fixed and fixated on other things, the idols in our lives.

I don't know what I think about fox hunting. The jury's out. But what I do know is that when the hounds get the scent of the fox, they begin to chase it.

They begin to bark and their tongues loll out of their mouths and their speed begins to increase until finally they corner the fox. Are we barking after God?

Are our tongues lolling out of our mouths and our speed increasing in the pursuit of knowing Christ?

This is the appeal of the gospel that not only do we return to the Lord but we go deeper with Him than ever before.

[13 : 41] That in the serious study of the Word, that in serious prayer, that in serious commitment to fellowship with the people of God, we get single-minded about knowing Him compared to the surpassing excellence of which everything else is rubbish.

well, that's all very well, nice words, but we say, you don't know how far from God I've strayed.

After all He's done by sending His Son to die for me on the cross, surely He won't want me back. To us, I say that if God did not want us back, if He didn't want us to return to Him, if He didn't want us to know Him even as He knows us, the Holy Spirit would not have begun this appeal to us in chapter 6, verse 1 with the word come, come.

Here's a word spoken not to the faithful but to the unfaithful, to the people we are today in our coldness and backsliding, not to the people we wish we were today.

However far from Him we've strayed, He wants us back, He loves us, and He longs for us to come.

[15 : 12] And so this first entry in Hosea's diary contains God's call to return to Him. So from verse 1 to 3 we have this faithful call.

But then in verses 4 through 6 we have this faithless response. Faithless response. Well there are three possible responses to God's call to Israel to return to Him.

The first is they do not listen, therefore they do not respond. The second is they listen and they respond in faith and obedience. The third is that they listen but they fail to respond.

Which of these best characterizes Israel's response to God's appeal? What in our daily readings of the Bible and in the public preaching of Scripture Sunday by Sunday best characterizes our response to God's appeal to return to Him and to know Him?

By the grace of the Holy Spirit we pray it may be the second that we eagerly listen to the call of God and we return to Him in faith and obedience.

[16 : 21] But what about Israel's response? Summarized in verses 4 through 6 as three things, temporary, stubborn, and hypocritical.

If Hosea should have kept a diary can you imagine what his entry would be? I called them to return to the God who loves them. But their response was so temporary.

They were so stubborn and they're such hypocrites. The response first of all in verse 4 was temporary. In verse 4 the God who knows His people says of them, Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.

You know the more you study prophets like Hosea the more you realize that Jesus based most of His parables upon the Old Testament history of God's people. So this morning we were looking at Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed.

And He talked of the seed being planted in different kinds of soil. Out of the four grounds in which the seed was planted, only one proved conducive to lasting growth and the bearing of fruit.

[17 : 36] But two were similar in this. When the seed was planted, it germinated, but soon after the plant perished. In the first case, because of the stony ground of persecution and tribulation, and in the second case, because of the thorns of worldly cares and the deceitfulness of riches.

These seeds germinated quickly, but the ground in which they grew meant that their growth was temporary, and soon they withered and died. And in a sense, Jesus is using another metaphor for what God describes here in Hosea 6 verse 4.

The response of God's people to return to him and to know him is initially enthusiastic, but it's not grounded in the heart. Its growth is temporary, and it soon dies out.

Like a morning mist, like a morning dew, the sun burns off. the deceitfulness of wealth, the allure of carnal pleasures, kills the call to return to God.

The response we see is so temporary. It could have been the threat of impending invasion by a foreign power, but for whatever reason, their initial enthusiasm to return to God dies a death.

[19 : 01] And the question for us is this, how permanent is our response to God when we hear the call to return to him? Perhaps we're involved in a relationship that we know to be wrong, and we hear God's call to return to him.

And initially we're convicted of our sin, and immediately we break off that relationship and devote ourselves to following God instead. But within days or weeks even, we begin to go back in our resolve, and soon we pick up that relationship again.

It's like the temporary resolve of the chain smoker, who, sick of his habit, throws his fags in the bin, only the next day to be driven mad by his addiction, took it to the new agent around the corner and buy a new packet.

When we hear the call to return to the Lord, how permanent is our response. That's one of the reasons Martin Luther preached the gospel to himself every day, because he knew how quickly, even in the course of a day, he could fall away from God.

He didn't want his love for God to be like a morning cloud driven off by the sun or like the dew. The heat of the day evaporates. He wanted his love for God to be like a never-ending monsoon rainstorm.

[20 : 32] Is that how we want our love for God to be? Morning dew or monsoon rainstorm?
Temporary.

Second, stubborn. Their response was stubborn. Now, we might suppose, in verse five, we might suppose that God's dealings with Israel were rather unfair, that God should not judge them based upon just one call to return to him.

But it's not just one call to return to him. Time and time again, he has sent his prophets out to call them to return to him. Time and time again, he has sent out his powerful word among them.

Time and time again, he has sent situations into their lives to draw them back to him. The diary of God's people, the history of the Old Testament, is one long list of God's people being called by God to return to him.

But they're so stubborn. Sometimes they'll listen and obey for a short time, sometimes they don't listen at all. But we can never accuse God of unfairness.

[21 : 42] He is speaking to them all the time, and he is calling them to return to him. Isn't this so true to our own spiritual experience? Perhaps through the preaching of the word, God's spirit has been calling us to return in faith to him, to abandon these unfaithful relationships in our own lives, the unfaithful ways of living we have, and this has happened not just once, but many, many times.

In fact, there are some people who stop coming to church altogether. We'll look at this in a few weeks' time. There are some people who stop coming to church altogether because God's call to them through the word becomes so oppressive. We're so stubborn.

There's a good, I don't know if it's a Scottish word or an Aberdeenshire word, but it's a word that my dad used to use all the time to describe our response to God's call. It's the word throng. Throng. When the sheep won't follow the shepherd, when the splinter refuses to come out of your finger, when you cannot dig the root out of the ground, our all too frequent response to the word of God throng.

In light of this, as we open our Bibles, our prayer needs to be Lord, keep me from being thrown. Maybe we even need to repeat the words of the hymn, take your word, plant it deep in us, shape

and fashion us in your likeness.

[23 : 12] In what areas of our lives is God calling us to abandon our empty ways and return to him in faithfulness? moral, economic, social, pleasure, commitments?

Are we stubborn? Are we thrown? Or are we ready to be shaped and fashioned in his likeness? the last response of the Israelites?

Stubborn, temporary, hypocritical, hypocritical, I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. This verse sounds familiar to us. It should, but it strains our part and parcel of the theme of the whole Bible.

The Israelites were a religious people. They knew how to offer sacrifices. They knew all about burnt offerings. They knew how to perform all the ceremonies of their religion. They had priests and they had prophets.

They looked the part of a faithful people, but their hearts were very far away from God. Thus, it has always been. In 1 Samuel 15 verse 22, the prophet Samuel says to their unfaithful ancestors, Has the Lord as great a delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the word of the Lord?

[24 : 32] And then he says these wonderful words, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. Again in Psalm 51 verses 16 through 17, David, Israel's greatest king, repenting of his sin, says of God, you do not delight in sacrifice or I would give it to you.

You will not be pleased with a burnt offering. He says, the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart you will not despise.

Quoting from Hosea 6 verse 6, in the New Testament in Matthew 9 verse 11, Jesus challenges the Pharisees saying to them, go and learn what this means.

I desire mercy, not sacrifice. It's not sacrifice God wants as much as the steadfast love of his people. It's not burnt offerings he wants as much as for his people to know him as he is.

The problem of Israel, the problem of Israel was not the form of their worship, it was the sinfulness of their hearts. The problem with God's Old Testament people was the problem of their hearts, summarized by the temporary nature of their response to God's call, their stubbornness, their hypocrisy.

[25 : 57] And yet, you know, we may be the same. We may go through all the rituals of our faith, church attendance, taking communion, serving God, faithfully giving our money to him, yet our hearts can be very far from him.

Which brings us to our conclusion. At the beginning of verse 4, God says these words, what shall I do with you, O Ephraim?

That's the nation of Israel. What shall I do with you, O Judah? That's the nation of Judah. Because clearly this pattern of restoration, backsliding, and repentance we see laced through the Old Testament diary of God's people isn't working.

What they need is something else. What they need is something better. And so God asks himself, almost as if he is consulting with himself, Father and Son and Spirit, talking with each other.

What shall we do with them? Giving more laws and more ceremonies isn't working because the problem with the Israelites is the problem of their hearts.

[27 : 19] What they need are new hearts. And so God asks himself, what am I going to do with you? Some 800 years later the answer comes, when the Son of God dies on a wooden cross to bear all the sins of his people.

God's question is answered when his only Son cries out, it is finished. And when he ascends into heaven, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to give his people new hearts, which by grace are able to love him, to know him, and to obey him in a way the Old Testament people of God would not and could not.

The answer to the question at the beginning of verse four is the cross, which means that the cross leaves us with less excuse than Israel for their unfaithfulness to God.

But it gives us all the more reason why. When we hear the appeals of Hosea, we long to respond. Come, let us return to the Lord.

Let us press on to know him. God asks, what shall I do with you? And he answers, my son will die.

[28 : 50] forever will praise him for his sacrifice for us. You see, God is working to a different deity than us, but at the center of God's deity, there's a cross.

Let us pray. Our Father, we thank you for the book of Isaiah. we thank you for that relentless message of your love for the unfaithful and your call to us to come.

Jesus himself said, I have not come to call the righteous, but the unrighteous. Lord, as we come to you, we recognize the centrality of the cross, and that without Jesus, we're always going to be far away from you, and we're never going to know a thing about you.

Lord, we pray that you'd give us faith in the living Christ tonight. Keep us from being thrown, oh Lord, so stubborn. help us, oh Lord, to be teachable, and by faith to say, even this evening, Lord, I've strayed so far from you, but I want to come back, and I want to know you.

In Jesus' name, we pray these things. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.