

Scandalous Grace – The Book of Hosea

Return to the Lord

Hosea 4-6

Mark Vroegop

“Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know; let us press on to know the LORD; his going out is sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth.” What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away. Therefore I have hewn them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes forth as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” (Hosea 6:1–6, ESV)

What can you do to be sure that someone *is* listening to you?

If you are a parent with small children, you might gently hold that little face in your hands and say, “Look me in the eyes.” If you are a Jr. High teacher and you sense that students are talking in the back of the class, you might abruptly stop your lecture, allowing the silence to make things awkward. If you are a police officer directing traffic, you might blow a whistle and wave your arms.

If you are a judge, you might issue a verdict that is meant to “send a message.” If you are a part of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, you might arrange for a destroyed vehicle to be brought to the school parking lot. If you are trying to prevent drug abuse, you might have a former addict share the tragedy of their story. Hearing is one thing. But listening – really listening – is another story.

Here’s another question: How do you know that someone *has* listened?

Imagine, for instance, that you are disciplining someone. As you are meeting at a restaurant, you have to share something hard with him. What would be some good signs that he’s heard you?

Perhaps if he understood the scope of what you were saying, he could repeat it back to you. Or if he applied your counsel in ways you hadn’t considered. Maybe if there was some kind of commitment and next steps for change.

Ultimately, however, you would only know if he really listened to you if there was change.

Repentance in Hosea

The Bible calls this repentance. It is a change of mindset so profound that it affects the entire person. In order to become a Christian, a person must repent from their sin and turn towards Christ. Biblical repentance, therefore, involves a “putting off” and “putting on” in light of a new

identity that is created by Jesus Christ (Colossians 3:5-17). The Puritan writer Thomas Watson (1620-1686) said: "Repentance is a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed."¹

Repentance is a gift (2 Timothy 2:25). It follows genuine saving faith in conversion. Those who are genuinely saved by faith embrace repentance. To trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins also means that you believe He has the right to call you to be holy (1 Peter 1:16). In other words, you don't accept Christ as Savior without accepting Him as Lord. Faith leads to repentance. Grace creates holiness. Actions follow commitment.

We can easily see how this applies to marriage. You would not think very highly of a person who claims to be committed to marriage but is not committed to faithfulness in marriage. The commitment to the institution of marriage is demonstrated in our actions. Both covenant and actions are required.

However, when it comes to our spiritual lives and our relationship with God we are prone to treat the relationship differently. We tend to not feel the weight of our actions as it relates to the place of God in our lives. And when that trend of spiritual compromise begins to characterize the entire culture, it becomes even worse. When spiritual unfaithfulness becomes the cultural norm, people begin to believe "that's just the way it is." Or they no longer see their own sins or the sins of their society as shocking.

The effect is a lack of repentance. The people do not listen. They do not change. And God must do something to wake them up. They are becoming wayward. God seeks to bring them back.

That's the message of Hosea, and it is the reason why He uses the example of a prophet who marries an unfaithful woman. God wants us to not only feel the shock of His grace, but also the warning of half-hearted repentance.

Warning about Not Listening

After looking at Hosea 1-3, we are now entering one of two lengthy sections which record the warning sermons or messages from Hosea to the people of Israel. Chapters 4-11 and 12-14 are two collections of messages which detail Hosea's call for the people of Israel to listen and to repent.

We ended last week's message by returning to the story of Hosea as he purchased Gomer for 15 shekels of silver. But then we also heard him call her to stop her wayward ways (3:3). The purchase of Gomer was to free her *from* her waywardness not to free her *for* her waywardness. Or to say it another way: Gomer was bought so that she could change.

Our text today is Hosea 4-6, and we need to keep the story of Hosea and Gomer in the back of our minds and hearts. These three chapters give us the first look at the substance of Hosea's warning about not listening and his call for the people of God to return to the Lord.

¹ <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/gift-repentance/>

1. Summary of Waywardness (vv. 1-3)

The first three verses represent a summation of the charges that God has against His people. The tone is one of a legal proceeding or a town crier announcing a proclamation. God is announcing to the people the nature of their waywardness.

That's why you find the word "Hear" in 4:1. But you also find it in 5:1. And in 6:1 Hosea says, "Come!" So, the tone of this text is proclamation and warning. God wants His people to clearly know the problem. They need the clarity that this word will bring. They need, frankly, a wake-up call.

The word "controversy" in verse one is important, and it has legal proceedings in mind. This is why NASB translates it as "a case" and the NIV as "a charge." Other commentators take it to mean a summons to court or simply a statement regarding a quarrel that God has with His people.² God is identifying the charges against His people. God announces His indictment against Israel.

The second half of verse one through verse three summarizes the waywardness of the people.

Failings

The indictment begins with three characteristics that should have marked the people of Israel. God's character and their character are worlds apart.

- **No faithfulness or steadfast love** – these two words often come as a pair in the Bible when describing the character of God. This was how God described Himself to Moses in Exodus 34:6-7. The people are not marked by fidelity or loving kindness in regards to God or toward one another.
- **No knowledge of God** – The aim of God's redemption is for His people to know Him and for Him to know them. This not only relates to knowing about God, but it ultimately connects to their lack of a relationship with Him.

The people have failed to live up to the basics of their covenant with God. The nation had drifted from the basics spiritual fundamentals of what it meant to be the people of God.

Disobedience

Hosea's message continues as he highlights more than what was absent. He identifies the ways the people have violated the basics of the Old Testament law. Hosea lists five of the ten commandments: swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery. The people were given over to these destructive sins.

These sins have a cumulative effect on a society in that the nation was marked by a lack of truthfulness and an ever-increasing disregard for human life.

² Hubbard, David A. *Hosea: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 24, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 105.

Culture

The sinfulness of the people, however, is not limited to their personal lives. The created order is affected. Notice how verse four starts: *"Therefore, the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish."* The rebellion of the people brought the judgment of God, and their culture was reaping what they had sown.

Israel was an agrarian culture. Animals, birds, and fish were their livelihood. The judgment of God involved the removal of these things. Drought and famine were often used by God in order to awaken the conscience of His people.

Their culture had gone down a path and there were consequences. The entire nation would feel the effects. They already were.

Do you groan with creation?

One of the reasons I wanted to study an Old Testament prophet is due to the unique voice that they bring to the table. This book and other prophets remind us that sin is a bigger problem than just what we've committed individually.

Don't get me wrong, individual sin is a huge problem. The Bible tells us that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). We are individual sinners with specific sins for which we are guilty. Jesus died to redeem sinful people – "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9-10). We are individual sinners, and each of us must repent and turn to Christ.

But there is another aspect of sin which I think we often neglect. In our individualization of everything and in our Western way of thinking, we tend to not see the bigger picture.

Listen to a few verses from Romans:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse." (Romans 1:18–20, ESV)

"For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." (Romans 8:22–23, ESV)

These texts remind us that there is something wrong with the world. Sin has made its way into the fabric of every part of our society. And when the effects of sin rear their ugly head, God's people should be reminded: sin is what's wrong with the world; sin is what's wrong with me; sin is why I needed a Savior; our world needs a Savior.

Hosea wanted the people to look around them. He wanted them to see their culture as a reflection of something about them. Their failure, their disobedience, and their cultural problems were connected.

Is that how you think about the city of Indianapolis? Do you know how many people were murdered this year in our city? This week it crossed 100. But do we groan over that? What if it happened in your neighborhood? You'd surely groan over that!

If you saw someone get angry on the road and do something stupid in the name of road rage, is your first reaction to say, "What an idiot!" Or is there a place in your soul that at some point says, "That's in me too." Last Sunday night we heard from our African-American brothers and sisters. Those who attended, you heard about their pain. And I hope there is place in your heart where you move beyond "I didn't own any slaves" to "it grieves me that racism is part of our world and a part of the sinfulness of the human heart."

Hosea helps us to realize that the scandal of God's grace is so much bigger than our individual stories. It's not just that I am Gomer. We are all Gomer. The whole creation is Gomer. And God's aim is to restore everything that broken and bring us back to Garden where we walk with God in the cool of the day.

One way that Hosea wants Israel to listen is by helping her to understand the essence of the problem. And one way we need to listen is by realizing that the essence of Israel's problem is still our problem.

2. Scope of Waywardness

The second aspect of Hosea's warning is seeing the scope of the waywardness. Beginning in 4:4 and continuing through to 5:14, Hosea identifies the extent of the sinfulness of the people. His summary indictment now becomes specific.

These verses are devastating and enlightening. They overwhelm us with the level of sinfulness that is present in our culture, and they also help us to see the various ways that waywardness creeps into our lives and culture.

There are many verses here. I'm going to give you an overview with a few highlights.

As you read 4:4 you should note that Hosea directs his prophetic ire toward the priests. He speaks to them directly because they have a responsibility for the spiritual climate and the culture of the nation. You've heard it say that the organization rots from the head down. Well, Hosea believes that the nation rots from the priest down. Look at what he says:

- v. 5 - the spiritual leaders are "stumbling." This is one of Hosea's choice ways to describe the connection between sinful actions and divine judgment (see 5:5, 14:1, 9).
- v. 6 - the priests have rejected the knowledge of God which has resulted in the people doing the same. The culture is not responsive to the Word of God. Therefore, the priests are rejected.
- vv. 7-8 - their growth in numbers only increased their sinfulness. The people's sinfulness and their sinfulness fed each other (see 2 Timothy 4:3-5).

- v. 9-11 – “like people like priest” is a summary of the problem. Their appetites will not be satisfied. The culture is given over to idolatry, drunkenness, and an absence of the knowledge of God.

The priests are not the only problem. Idolatry is everywhere, and it makes them delusional.

- v. 12 – they are seeking divine guidance from a piece of wood and a walking staff. There is a spirit of idolatry that marks the land.
- v. 13-14 – their idolatry is everywhere. It is open, and it is immoral.
- v. 15-18 – Israel has a stubborn heart. Judah should be warned not to follow in her steps.
- v. 19 – the nation has been deeply impacted “a wind has wrapped them in its wings.”

As we move into chapter five, we see more indictments of leaders and the culture of the nation.

- vv. 1-2 – the leaders, the priests, and their culture are deep in clutches of their sinful ways.
- vv. 3-7 – the spiritual life of the nation is marked by a spirit of rebellion, self-reliant pride, and an absence of God in their lives. They are going through the motions, but God is not with them anymore.
- vv. 4-8 – God announces the coming judgment. Notice the words like desolation (v. 9), punishment (v. 9), wrath (v. 10), oppressed (v. 11), and judgment (v. 11). God has become like a moth that eats garments or dry rot that destroys wood (v. 12).
- vv. 13-15 – when Israel realized her problem, she refused to turn to the Lord. Instead, she turned to Assyria. Their self-centeredness caused them to put their hopes in a man-made solution, and God became like a lion to them.

The scope of the nation’s waywardness is incredible, isn’t it? This prophetic word is meant to awaken them to the reality of what is really happening in their culture. It is far too easy for Israel and for us to become so accustomed to our surroundings that we forget the important lessons that we should be heeding.

Let me give you three applications of this dark section:

1. **Leaders are accountable for waywardness.** Hosea makes it very clear that those who are in positions of spiritual or national leadership are accountable for the spiritual culture that they create or fail to create. Pastors, Elders, Small Group Leaders, Deacons, ABG Teachers, Youth Ministry leaders cannot throw their hands up and neglect their responsibility. Parents, Husbands, and Fathers have a responsibility for setting the spiritual tone. If you lead a business, have a seat of influence, or write the laws of our land, you have an accountability before God.
2. **Sin is progressively pervasive.** Our actions and disregard for God are not only wrong, but they can become a part of our culture such that we are no longer shocked, outraged, or disgusted. We no longer blush, and our comfort level with what is sinful becomes way too high.
3. **Godless solutions will not work.** The story of Israel involves seeking help in all the wrong places. It’s our story as well. Rather than dealing with the root of the issue – our spiritual waywardness – we keep trying temporary solutions. We change locations, jobs, friends, relationships. We read the next book, go to a new conference, or talk about the accountability

that we need. But the problem is our fundamental waywardness that we keep bringing to every so-called solution.

God wants the people of Israel to realize who they are. He wants them to understand what is really happening. This text is heavy, but it is designed to lead them to the grace of God which appears in chapter six.

3. Solution to Waywardness

With such a heavy section, we come to back to the nature of God's grace. We see, yet again, the scandalous nature of it. The darkness of chapters four and five make us appreciate what we find next.

Chapter six begins with a call for the people to return to the Lord. This is a familiar call on the part of the prophets for the people to repent: "incline your heart unto the Lord your God" (Josh 24:23); "circumcise yourselves to the Lord" (Jer 4:4); "wash your heart from wickedness" (Jer 4:14); "break up your fallow ground" (Hos 10:12).³ The basic idea is to turn from evil and to turn to good.

God's motivation in discipline has always been the restoration of His people. He tears down to heal; He strikes down so that He will bind up.

In verse two we read about God's intention to raise the nation up on the "third day." Obviously this is an allusion to what will happen to Jesus in His death and resurrection. More on this in a moment.

Verse three rests its hope on the faithfulness of God. The grace of God is assured. It is like showers of rain during the spring-time. Hosea is trying to woo the people toward turning back to their Redeemer. God is waiting for His people. He is ready to be gracious to them. He longs for them to repent.

But notice what Israel's love is like! Their faithfulness and fidelity to God is like a morning cloud (v. 4). Their affection is like the dew on the ground (v. 4). It doesn't last. It evaporates and is gone so quickly. God is not looking for half-hearted, externally performed religion. He doesn't want sacrifice and burnt offerings without steadfast love and sacrifice (v. 6). The nation has rebelled against God, and the effects are everywhere (vv. 7-11).

And yet God is ready for them to repent. Hosea is calling them, as one of them, to return to the Lord.

The solution to their waywardness was to return to the Lord – to repent. Scandalous grace means that God is willing and ready to pour out mercy on those who turn from their sin and turn back to Him. Judgment for Israel did not have to happen. The warning was given with the hope that they might hear the Word of the Lord and turn.

³ Hamilton, Victor P. "2340 שׁוּב," ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 909.

Are You Listening?

This text leads us back to the first question of this message: how do you know if someone is really listening? But let's not just ask that question generally. Let's push it personally by asking ourselves the following questions:

- Do you know the problem inside of you and in the world is sinful rebellion?
- Have you turned to Christ for the forgiveness of your sins?
- Do you see the remaining presence of sin in your life and feel how bad it is?
- Do you sense the Lord speaking to you today through His Word?
- In what areas of your life need more "turning"?

I hope you are able to hear the Word of the Lord this morning! I hope that you heed the call to "return to the Lord."

The scandal of God's grace is the calling of God to pour out grace on you – to rescue you from your waywardness. And in order to accomplish that beyond Hosea, God sent Jesus on a scandalous mission.

He entered the broken waywardness of our world. He bore the penalty of our judgment. He was crucified because of our rebellion. And then God raised Him up on the third day, declaring once and for all repentance and restoration are possible for all who return to the Lord.

This is scandalous grace. Are you listening?

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