

HOSEA NO. 2
October 16th, 1998
Hosea's Main Point

Hosea 1:1-11; 3:1-5

Hosea begins with a bang! 'Go,' the Lord tells his prophet, 'take to yourself an adulteress wife and children of unfaithfulness.' This, it seems to mean and has always been widely taken to mean, that the Lord commanded Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman, indeed, perhaps a prostitute.

To be sure, many have recoiled from that conclusion. Thinking that such a union would be, in itself sinful, and thus something the Lord would never intend, good and wise commentators have come to other conclusions.

- Calvin maintained that the whole account of Hosea and Gomer is only a parable; not a description of what actually happened and what Hosea actually did at all. It was a story to make a point. The late E.J. Young, professor of Old Testament at Westminster Theological seminary, took a similar view.
- A fine new commentary on Hosea argues contrarily that Gomer was not a prostitute at all; that the phrase 'adulterous wife' is used metaphorically, as 'prostitution' is used metaphorically elsewhere in Hosea, to refer to Israel's spiritual adultery. In this case, Gomer is just a typical Israelite woman. This scholar further suggests, as have some others in the history of the interpretation of the book, that the woman described in chapter 3 is not Gomer, but another woman, whom Hosea later married, either after Gomer died or Hosea divorced her.

I will not trouble or confuse you with the complexities of this debate. After weighing carefully the various arguments, it remains my conviction that the text should be read in the straightforward way in which it is written; that it is very difficult to believe that chapters 1 and 3 are not speaking of the same woman, and that she was, actually, before and after her marriage to Hosea, an adulteress, if not a prostitute.

Such a case of revelation by action would be nothing new in Old Testament prophecy, nor would even such symbolic action as touched upon marriage. We read in Jeremiah 16:2-3 that the prophet Jeremiah remained a bachelor his entire life, against all the expectations and desires of Jewish manhood, as an enacted prophecy against the people of God. We know that the death of Ezekiel's wife and the odd behavior God commanded his prophet to display in connection with it, were made symbolic of God's purpose and plan for his people (24:15-27).

It is a shocking thing, of course, that the Lord requires of Hosea: it required him to forsake the natural hopes he had for a happy marriage; it consigned him to endure the mental anguish and the dishonor of his wife's unfaithfulness, and to expose himself to the suspicions which naturally attach to the husband of such a wife.

But that, of course, is precisely the point! Hosea's marriage is an enactment of the Lord's marriage to Israel, of her unfaithfulness to him, of her adultery with the false gods of the pagan peoples around her, and of his pain at her betrayal. And the children which Hosea and Gomer bear, and the names which the Lord requires to be given to them—express the Lord's intention in the most decisive and unmistakable way: for her unfaithfulness to him, because she has broken his covenant, the Lord is about to reject Israel, is prepared not to love her anymore, indeed, to cast her away, not to be his people any longer.

But then, much later, after God has judged and punished this generation of his people, he will return to them and restore them to himself and renew his covenant with them. This is the promise of the last two verses of chapter 1—fulfilled at least in large part, as we know from the use of these verses in the New Testament, in the gathering of the Gentiles into the church after Pentecost. It is this promise of restoration which is prophetically enacted in Hosea's relationship with Gomer, presumably subsequent to her bearing the three children. So we read in chapter 3 of a continuing relationship, but without intimacy or consummation, between Hosea and Gomer, suggestive of that time of punishment God will bring upon Israel, before he restores her to himself.

This message of impending doom and eventual restoration, is the main burden of Hosea's prophecy. His main point, is that this generation of Israelites will fall under the wrath of God and be destroyed for their unbelief and dis-

obedience, but that God will not cast off his people forever. And this, after all, is only what God long ago promised when first he made the covenant with Israel: that he would never forsake the covenant he made with their father Abraham, but, that any particular Israelite or any generation of Israel which did not fulfil the covenant requirements of faith and obedience, would certainly not enjoy the blessings of God's covenant and salvation, but would be visited with its terrible curses instead.

Now, this is not only the main point of Hosea; it is the main point of Old Testament prophecy; and a main point of much of New Testament preaching as well.

And we can be absolutely sure that Scripture would not make this point so repeatedly and emphatically were it not of capital importance!

It is the natural assumption of our flesh that to belong to the church, to belong to the covenant community, to be numbered among the people of God, is sufficient grounds for and evidence of one's salvation and one's peace with God. So common is this conviction; so widespread this point of view, so subtle in its grip upon human hearts and minds, and, at the same time, so utterly mistaken and terribly dangerous, that the Bible spends a huge portion of its time and effort disabusing us of this very idea. You can be a church member; belong to the Israel of God, be numbered with those who comprise the covenant community, and still fall under the wrath of God and be condemned to suffer the curses of God's law.

And so, from the beginning of the Bible to the end of it, on page after page, God's people are called upon to examine themselves to see if they be in the faith; to make their calling and election sure; to strive to be certain and that for the right reasons, that they belong to the people of God, not only in an outward way, but really and essentially and eternally.

Now, many have complained against this emphasis on self-examination. It strikes them as making the Christian life less a thing of joy and peace, and more a thing of hard work, and uncertainty, and gloomy introspection. Whether this is so or not, we shall see, but, it surely cannot be denied, that the Bible has made of self-examination a most crucial part of true and faithful Christian living and it has made of self-examination an imperative, if you and I are to be sure that we will not be numbered among the many, such as those in Hosea's day, who belonged to the church and went to hell. If Hosea will teach us anything at all; it will teach us this—for this is the prophet's

burden: Salvation, being right with God, is nothing to take for granted. It is something to make certain of!

Using Hosea's great point, that here a whole generation of God's people are about to slip away under divine wrath and judgment, let me elaborate in three points the Biblical doctrine of self-examination.

I. First, the Scripture says that self-examination is a necessity.

If one great message looms over the Book of Hosea, surely is it not this message: that it is amazingly easy for people, even well-instructed and sophisticated people, to think that they are saved; to satisfy themselves that all is right between themselves and God, when they are not and it is not. Israel, when Hosea began his ministry was at peace with itself, confident in its own rightness and its safety, and was utterly unaware that in a few years it was to be obliterated by the wrath of God.

And, this is hardly a point unique to Hosea. It is a chief burden of biblical teaching about salvation and is grimly illustrated throughout the biblical history.

1. No, it is not enough to say that, according to the Bible, often some in the church think themselves saved when they are not.
2. It would be truer to the Scripture to say that almost always *most* people who are numbered as church members are, in fact, self-deceived, and are not saved and not right with God. It is not enough to say that all Israel is not Israel, as Paul puts it; it is more to the point to say that usually most Israel is not Israel!

I do not say that that is the case in a living congregation of Christian people, where the Word is believed and Christ is exalted as Savior and Lord; I do not say that it is so in this congregation.

But take the church as a whole, as it exists in this world; with all of its parts and denominations—Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant, in all parts of the world, and surely it is both the observation of believing people and the teaching of Scripture that today's Christendom is chiefly populated by unbelievers who are about to fall under the wrath of God, however glibly their ministers may have taught them to feel safe and secure.

And even in living congregations and doctrinally sound and serious denominations such as our own: the Scripture warns against the creeping, subtle tendency of the heart to take salvation for granted. Even in such churches there are to be found more or less false sons and daughters, unrecognized by everyone, even themselves. They are the seed that falls on thorn-infested soil, or in shallow soil; they are the undetected hypocrites—who may, like Judas, Demas, and Ananias and Sapphira, show their true colors some day—or who may remain undetected, like so many in the Lord Christ’s parables, until the great day, when the angels of God separate the wheat from the chaff, and when the Lord dismays and shocks his erstwhile followers by saying to them: ‘Depart from me, I never knew you.’

This is why the Scripture and why a faithful pastor returns to this matter again and again and calls upon the people of God repeatedly to examine themselves to see if they be in the faith. It is a mistake, worse than which there is none—to think you are saved when you are not—and no error is more frequently or easily made.

As one has put it: ‘We can deceive God none of the time, we can deceive others some of the time, but we can deceive ourselves all of the time!’ Self-examination is a necessity!

II. In the second place, self-examination is a duty.

It is a commandment God has given us to keep; part of the obedience we owe to him. There is no believer past the need to examine himself, no one so clearly beyond doubt a child of God that he or she need not practice self-examination, for it is a commandment every member of the covenant community is obliged to keep.

Some, who have objected to laying such stress upon self-examination, have maintained otherwise. Hannah Whithall Smith, champion of the Victorious Christian Life movement, scornfully claimed that there were but two texts in the whole Bible which spoke of self-examination—a claim which is not preposterous only if by ‘two texts’ she meant the whole Old Testament and the whole New Testament. Self-examination and the duty to practice it are everywhere in the Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, by command, by illustration, and by whole passages such as the Book of Hosea which thrust the necessity of self-examination upon us by the force of the bare, unvarnished truth that great multitudes of church members eventually perish, victims of

the wrath of the God they only imagined to be their Father and Savior.

Paul commands his Corinthian church members: ‘Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.’ In a discussion of spiritual deception in his second letter, John warns his readers: ‘Watch yourselves that you do not lose what you have worked for.’ The letter James wrote is all about the self-deception into which his readers had fallen. The Lord Christ’s last direct speech to a church, the church of Laodicea in Revelation 3, is a summons to self-examination: They thought themselves fine, but their Lord and Savior said to them: ‘You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.’

It is precisely because we are so good at deceiving ourselves; so skilled at evading the truth about ourselves, so artful at thinking of ourselves as we ought not to think and considering ourselves far far better than we are, that Scripture must command us, order us, admonish us, again and again to do this work of self-examination.

Wise and godly men have always stressed the importance of a true and accurate self-knowledge. Charles Simeon wrote that ‘the knowledge of ourselves is fundamental to all religion.’ Augustine, long before him, said that ‘The beginning of intelligence is to know yourself, and to know yourself a sinner.’ It was a subject the Puritans were masters of, precisely because they cared so much and studied so hard to be masters of the heart and the true Christian life. Richard Baxter lists fully twenty reasons to examine yourself.

Until you know and acknowledge the truth about yourself, you cannot know where you stand before God, whether you are a Christian or not; and if you are a Christian, what kind of Christian, really, you are. And so Scripture everywhere commands us to take heed to ourselves!

III. In the third place, self-examination is not only a necessity, not only a duty, it is also the biblical, the divinely charted path to blessing and spiritual prosperity.

It may well be a hard, time-consuming, and often painful work to search out and to contemplate the truth about oneself, but it is the best way to the joy, the peace, and the spiritual power for which every true Christian hungers and thirsts.

1. It was only after the prodigal son ‘came to himself’ that he thought to

return to his father's home and there enjoyed both reconciliation with his father and the privileges of sonship once again.

2. Lloyd-Jones once wrote: 'the reasons why so many Christians live shallow lives is that they won't take time to examine themselves.' Without a clear idea of the difference between what you are and what you ought to be, there is no motive to grow up in Christ, no constraint to follow hard after sanctification. Just as in a business, a company that does not take stock, that does not examine its performance in order to correct its faults and maximize its strengths, is likely very soon to fail—so no Christian moves forward who does not take careful stock.
3. Similarly, those who practice self-examination are those who will enjoy the most assurance of salvation; those who do not take their salvation for granted and those who live most in the glad confidence that they are new creatures in Christ and are soon to be in heaven with him. As Spurgeon put it: 'the most cautious are always those with the most assurance'. And it is assurance which fills us, Peter says, with an inexpressible and glorious joy.
4. Or, take spiritual power and effectiveness and holiness of life. It is the man or the woman who takes care to study his or her life in the light of God's word, who knows always what is going on or not going on, that stays the nearest to the Lord. A friend of McCheyne's once explained the secret of his powerful ministry by saying: 'he was always on guard.'

Self-examination ensures that we will build our lives on the solid foundation of the truth, and not on the deceptions concerning ourselves to which we are so prone. And the result, when practiced with faith, will be peace, love, strength, and, above all, joy.

So self-examination is a necessity, it is a duty, and it is the divinely appointed means to spiritual growth and prosperity.

So to conclude, what, precisely, is this self-examination which Hosea's contemporaries forsook to their everlasting doom?

Well, it is not, as is often alleged and thought, some gloomy kind of introspection which depressed people are particularly inclined to practice. It is not simply a long, discouraging account of one's sins and failures, a melancholy exercise in self-hatred.

I do not deny that it can become this in the hands of melancholy and despondent people. Some very godly people have tended to this error and have turned their proper self-examination into an unChristian preoccupation with themselves and their sin. Thomas Shepard was such a person, so introspective, so often depressed by what he found within himself, that he could not preach. James Fraser of Brea, the Scottish Covenanter minister, whose Memoirs are an example of self-examination run amok, prompted this comment from Alexander Whyte: ‘Fraser of Brea takes the Apostle much too seriously and much too literally, for he is always and in everything examining himself.’

No, as Ian Tait once put it in this pulpit, biblical self-examination is only taking the light of the Word of God down into the cellar of our hearts; it is not taking a camp-bed down there with us!

Biblical self-examination is such things as these:

1. It is reading the Word of God; its promises, its commandments, its history, its warnings, its encouragements with ourselves, our very own lives before our eyes. This is something which, we must confess, very often we do not do, even when we are reading the Bible.

It is reading the Bible and reading our hearts and lives together, like Bunyan’s Mr. Prywell. That is ‘Pry’ in its old sense as another form of ‘peer’ or ‘to look closely at.’ How, exactly does my life compare with the life the Bible describes as the life of the children of God? Do I love God and do I love Christ and what is the evidence of that love and how am I now demonstrating it? Do I rest my hope of eternal life in Christ alone? Or, as Mr. Prywell would have practiced this self-examination:

“Have I penitence? . . . Have I grief, shame, pain, horror, weariness for my sin? Do I pray and repent, if not seven times a day as David did, yet at least three times, as Daniel? If not as Solomon, at length, yet shortly as the publican? If not like Christ, the whole night, at least for one hour? If not on the ground and in ashes, at least not in my bed? If not in sackcloth, at least not in purple and fine linen? If not altogether freed from all, at least from immoderate desires? Do I give, if not as Zaccheus did, fourfold, as the law commands, with the fifth part added? If not as the rich, yet as

the widow?... If not above my power, yet up to my power? What vow, what solemn promise, made when trouble was upon me, have I completely cast behind my back? What about secret prayer? At what times, for what things, and for what people do I in secret pray? What about secret sin? What is its name, and what does it deserve, and what fruit am I already reaping out of it? What is my besetting sin, and what steps do I take, as God knows, to crucify it? Do I love money too much? Do I love praise too much? Do I love eating and drinking too much? Does envy make my heart a very hell? Let me name the man I envy, and let me keep my eye upon him. Let me mix his name with all the psalms and prayers and sermons I hear and utter. Or is it diabolical ill-will? Or is it a wicked tongue against an unsuspecting friend? Let me examine myself as Paul did, as Prywell did, and as God would have me do it, and I will discover things in myself so bad that if I were to put words on them to-night, I would stop my ears in horror and flee out of the church.” (from Alexander Whyte, Bunyan Characters, III, pp.153, 160.)

Practice such self-examination as this until you are far too well acquainted with the truth about yourself to care about others or to judge yourself by others. Judas could say that he didn't lie like Peter; the seed sown in thorny ground could say that it did better than the seed sown on the path, and the worst devil in hell but one can say that he is not as bad as that other fellow; but what does it matter; none of them are saved.

2. And then read the lives of other Christians, of other times and other places. Then we will know enough to compare ourselves to a higher standard than we might be able to observe in our own day. The medieval philosopher Abelard said that he sprung from a country 'of which the soil is light and the temper of the inhabitants is light.' Well, what of us who come from 20th century America. We could be very fine American Christians, and be, in truth, living at a very low level of Christian spirituality and effectiveness. I just finished reading Carl Henry's autobiography, and that book taught me again and very well how lazy and undisciplined and unproductive my life is.

3. And then, make it a practice to review your life, your days one by one, as God did, after each day of the creation week, and see if morning and evening it was all very good, or was something else. The author of Psalm 77 tells us that at the end of the day he would lie in bed, and his heart would muse and his spirit would inquire.
4. And, then, finally, pray to God that he might examine you: ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me, and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.’

And so practice that inspection of your heart and life until daily you know yourself; until you see yourself first as others see you; and then press on until you see yourself as God sees you—and then, knowing the truth about yourself so well and so accurately, these results will inevitably follow:

1. You will not think better of yourself than you ought to think.
2. You will never imagine that you could be saved in any other way than by clinging fast to Jesus Christ and his righteousness and blood,
3. You will never think that your salvation was a small thing, but must always be a matter of great surprise and the most heady joy to you.
4. And, you will never think that you do not need to work long and hard each day, judging yourself, putting sin to death, practicing obedience in the fear of God, if ever you are to live a life worthy of the grace and mercy you have received.

And, at the end, having made such self-inspection and self-knowledge the practice of your days and nights, you will never be found at the last with Hosea’s contemporaries, when many from the east and from the west come to take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of Heaven, while they, with many others of the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.