

HOSEA NO. 8
January 8th, 1989
The Great Sunday Sin

Hosea 6:4-10

Review: Hosea's great message is that of the doom which God is about to bring upon his people for their disloyalty to Him. Remember we said that two-thirds of the book is comprised of the evidence which Hosea presents, as if a prosecuting attorney, to prove that Israel has betrayed the Lord and his covenant. One quarter of the book is devoted to enumerating the curses which God is about to visit upon his people for their faithlessness and apostasy; and the little that remains promises that after He is finished with his judgment, he will return to bless a future generation of his chosen people.

In the sermons so far we have enlarged upon these major themes by giving attention to what the prophet has to say about the role of the ministers and then the role of the parents in Israel's falling away from God, about the wrath of God, about how people by much sinning and much refusing of God can pass the point of no return—never again to be visited by the Lord or summoned to receive his great salvation; and finally about the wonderful and everlasting mercy of the Lord, his forgiveness and his grace given to us in defiance of our sins and our rebellion against Him.

TEXT COMMENTS:

- v. 6:6 The word 'mercy' is the same word rendered 'love' in v. 4 (*hesed*); With reference to God it refers to God's grace and lovingkindness (the last decision of the RSV translators was regarding the translation of this word: they chose 'steadfast love'). But, with reference to man it especially refers to that love, that devotion, that loyalty which is our part of the covenant which God has made with us. Hosea's great point is that Israel has been disloyal to God and the covenant; she has failed to show this love and loyalty which was her part.
- v. 6:7 Like Adam; or as at Adam; or, even, one modern evangelical commentary: 'they have walked on my covenant like it was dirt'—the words Adam and dirt being quite similar.

v. 6:8ff Presumably obvious references to Hosea's contemporaries.

Worship is the true test of where a church or where any churchgoer really stands before God. Worship will tell in the end whether that man or woman loves the Lord or does not, whether he or she really believes or does not. Worship is the test. The Sunday service is the barometer.

It is today and it was in Hosea's day.

1. Israel's worship had clearly gone far wrong. It had been corrupted wholesale by the pagan worship round about Israel. Against the direct commandments of the Law of Moses, as we read in 4:12-14, Israel was making widespread use of idols, was offering sacrifices at great trees and on hilltops after the manner of the Baal worship of that time and place, and had even turned their worship into the sensual, sexual orgies which were a regular part of the pagan fertility rites of the ANE. (And of at least one church in our area!)
2. But, horrible as that was—that they should ostensibly worship God by doing the very things which so offended and disgusted Him, the very things he had forbidden them to do, which were so contrary, so appalling to his holy and righteous character; these pagan practices, this idolatry and prostitution, was not the main problem, was not the bottom of the matter at all.
3. No, underneath that outward corruption and defiance of God's law was a still deeper and more menacing problem, which was the true cause of Israel's corrupt practices of worship.

And this was that she had lost altogether a true sense of what worship was; her worship had first become a true hypocrisy before it became naked paganism. This is Hosea's great point in the famous verse 6. Israel does not love God and does not care about what pleases Him. These people offer sacrifices; oh, yes; they are religious—and for their sacrifices they expect God to give them what they need and to protect them from their enemies—but they have no intention of living according to God's commandments, or doing his will, or truly loving and thanking Him for his great love and kindness to them.

They leave their worship of God and do exactly as they please and commit whatever sins they desire to commit and live between their trips to church a life of unrelieved disobedience and rebellion against God.

This is the bottom error and the bottom sin: Israel has come to think about her God, the living and true God who made all things and who searches the hearts of men, in the same way that the pagans around her thought of their false gods and idols. They had come to believe that by offering sacrifices and performing rituals you could ingratiate yourself with this god and get him to do good things for you—and then you could live however you please.

And Hosea, along with all of the prophets of Israel, thunders the Lord's response:

“IF YOU WILL NOT LIVE FOR ME, if you do not love me, if you do not revere and fear me as the living God and your Savior, then I don't want your sacrifices, I don't want your prayers, I don't want your worship—and your giving it to me only makes matters worse. The only worship that pleases me is that worship offered by those who intend also to love me and to serve me with their lives.

“DON'T YOU DARE CLASS me with those silly idols of the peoples round about you who supposedly will do you good if you do something good for them. . . Don't you dare worship me, the living God and holy God who loves righteousness and hates sin, as if I were one of THEM! As if I could be bought and bought so cheaply!”

The bottom problem in Israel was that they had a Canaanite theology of God and were worshipping Him accordingly.

And in this, as in the rest of what Hosea preaches, his message is as perennially important, as relevant, and as up-to-date as today's church service. For this same view of God and this same corrupted worship is always lurking nearby when Christians gather on the Lord's day to worship God.

It was exactly the sin which the Pharisees committed. Indeed, Jesus exposed their sin in Matthew 9:13 by quoting this very same verse, Hosea 6:6. They too supposed that they could please God with their outward rituals and their religious formalities while all the time with their hearts and their lives ignoring the will and the pleasure of God.

And, as soon as the new generation of the church was formed after Pentecost this same error began to creep in—outward rites and religious forms taking the place of a living faith in the Lord and a love for him that expressed itself not only in worship but in an obedient and reverent life.

In the middle ages, on a scale similar to that of Hosea's day, the worship of the Christian church was corrupted by all manner of ideas and practices borrowed from the paganism which surrounded Christian Europe—and came to include all manner of pure superstitions, such as the selling of indulgences to shorten one's time in purgatory, the ceremony of the mass, holy water, images and idols and prayers to the saints and so on—but all of this was the result of the same deeper problem. The church had first come, like her forebears of Hosea's day, to think more of ceremonies than of God, more of rites than of faith and holiness of life.

And that problem is as real today as ever it has been and the sin of a corrupted worship is committed as widely in our day as it has ever been. This very Sunday morning all over the world, like the Israelites of Hosea's day, multitudes of supposed Christians, millions upon millions of them, will go to a church and participate in acts of worship and join their voices in singing hymns of praise to God, confessing their sins and promising obedience; they will listen to the Word of God read as if it were truly the Word of God to be believed and obeyed by all men, but they will not mean, really mean, anything they say; they will leave that church and forget in a moment all that they sung and prayed and confessed and promised and they will return to their homes to pick up their self-centered, disobedient, sinful, God-neglecting lives right where they left them to go to church.

Whole great churches today, this very Sabbath, will perform rites and ceremonies which have no basis whatsoever in the Word of God; but, still worse, multitudes of people, in unsound churches and in sound churches too, will offer their worship but not themselves to God.

1. Sometimes any discerning observer of that worship can tell that it has gone far wrong. Sometimes it is the shape and form of the worship itself that indicates that the people have not come with a true faith to worship God—whether that form is some unbiblical superstitious ritual as you might find in old-fashioned Roman Catholicism; or the transformation of a service of divine worship into a show, an entertainment, as has now become so common in American evangelical circles. A minister

friend of mine in the South was telling me that a large church in his town was so famous for its razzle-dazzle worship service, that it was known widely in the community as ‘The Barnum and Bailey Baptist Church.’

2. But do not think that I intend to use this text of Scripture to pick on the Catholics or some other part of Christendom.
3. I have been in orthodox, evangelical Presbyterian churches; I have been in PCA churches, beloved, in which, though the service itself was unobjectionable, though every part was biblical and every action one that a true believer could participate in with a real faith, there was such a deadness, such a lifelessness, the atmosphere was so heavy that I could somehow feel the dead formality, the barrenness of that worship. I remember feeling similarly oppressed in some churches I supplied in Scotland where a century of liberalism had eaten the heart out of the church’s faith; but I have felt the same oppression here in Bible believing churches.
4. But, still worse, that same error, that same sinful tendency to reduce worship to banal and merely outward forms, I find in my very own heart as I come to church Sunday after Sunday, and I know it lies there in your hearts as well.

It is astonishing and fearful how easily, how regularly, how constantly our great faith, our Christian religion with all of its utterly unique emphasis upon a personal God who has loved his people with an everlasting love and saved them from sin and death at such cost to himself, can be turned, even by God’s true children, into a religion like all the others—a regular performance of outward duties, mechanically repeated week after week.

That we not permit it to be so of us individually or as a congregation, that we stand against this tendency with a holy violence, let me remind you of three simple facts.

I. To worship God as Hosea’s contemporaries worshipped God, to worship him with outward forms but without the love of our hearts

and the devotion and consecration of our daily lives, is to be false to God himself.

To come ostensibly to worship God, but to give him a mindless performance of hymns and prayers and promises, to do the acts of worship without love and joy and trust and hope in the Lord, and to promise ourselves to Him on Sunday only to live for ourselves the rest of the week, is not only to reckon him to be no true God—to treat him as if he cannot see what is within our hearts and cannot tell that our promises are insincere; but it is altogether to reduce him to our level. . . as if he can be bought and sold and so cheaply; as if he would be impressed, as we so often are, by so little, by something so insincerely and poorly done, by a gift which has cost nothing.

II. Second, to worship God as Hosea's contemporaries did, without true covenant loyalty and devotion to our Savior and King, is to be false to our salvation.

It is to behave as if our relationship with God were founded upon some exchange: we give him what he wants and he forgives our sins; we give him his sacrifices, his hymns, his prayers, his hour every Sunday, and he will take care of us in the day of judgment.

But where in all of this is the true salvation of God in Jesus Christ; where is the unconquerable love which sent the Savior into the world to suffer and die for us while we were still his enemies and rebels against his rule and will; where is the cross and the empty tomb and the tremendous victory over sin and death which the Lord Christ won for us; where is his ascension to the Right Hand and his faithful intercession for us and his coming again to bring us to his Father's House. Where is God's grace and love from which all of this salvation comes, and the Savior's suffering and death by which it was bought, and his power by which it will soon be consummated. And where is the Holy Spirit, by whom alone each one of us who is saved this morning came to know the truth that has set us free, and with whom each day we live, and move, and have our being?

It is all from God and from Christ and from the Holy Spirit and even our faith by which we believe in Christ and our obedience by which we follow him, these two are the gifts of a loving God to us.

Can we then come to church thinking that God's favors can be bought and will be sold and bought and sold so cheaply for an hour's half-hearted atten-

tion to a church service? Can we be true to God's great salvation in any other way than coming to church intending to love our God and our Savior—to love him with our worship for all that he has done for us—and strengthened by that worship to love him with our very lives? No, if we believe we have been saved by grace and by Christ, and that we contributed nothing to our salvation except the sin from which we have been redeemed, then worship for us, if it be true, cannot be anything else but love and thanksgiving from the heart and with the whole life.

III. Third, to worship God without covenant loyalty, without this *hesed*, is to be false to worship itself.

For worship in the Bible and in true Christianity is an intensely *personal* thing; it is an engagement between two persons and between the Lord himself and his congregation.

Now you know very well, and I know, that if the Lord God took his place in the front of this church on a Sunday morning and sat upon his high throne, with seraphim hovering over each shoulder and his glory filling this sanctuary—we would not dare, it would not occur to us to imagine that we could approach him, hand him a few half-heartedly sung hymns and prayers offered with half a mind and a promise we really didn't intend to keep and think that we *had worshipped God!!*

Oh, no; we would bow before him in reverence and fear; we would sing praise to him with hearts which were stirred down to the bottom; and we would promise ourselves to him without qualification, heartily repenting of everything in our lives which we know displeases and dishonors Him, and consecrating ourselves to live a life worthy of such a great King and Savior. His glory combined with what we could see of the nailprints on his hands would banish forever the idea that in worshipping him we could make do with something less than giving ourselves wholly away to him.

Well, beloved; that same Lord Christ promises to be present by his Spirit whenever his church gathers to worship Him and to hear his Word—and whether we can yet see him with our eyes or not is of the very least importance. He is here, personally, and it is to him, to this Lord Christ, to the crucified and risen Savior, to the King of Kings, that we give our worship Sunday after Sunday, for better or for worse; it is at his nail-printed feet that we lay our sacrifices and offerings every Sabbath morning and Sabbath

night. What do you think of your worship now? And how important do you think it must be to purify your weekly worship and our weekly worship that it might be offered to the Lord in spirit and in truth?

Now, some of you here this morning are not Christians, are not *yet* Christians. We hope and we most earnestly pray that you will soon be Christians. In the old days of the Christian church, you would have been allowed to stay through the hymns and the sermon, but would have had to leave the church when it came time for the Lord's Supper. That was a well-meant though questionable attempt to do justice to the principle that no one could ever worship God aright who did not love God and had not surrendered himself or herself to God by acknowledging Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

We are glad that you are with us; we want you to share in our services of worship and we try hard to worship the Lord in a way that both helps you to understand more clearly the good news that Jesus is the Savior and the King and causes you to want Him to be your Savior and King as he is ours. But, we must tell you that you must not think that you are worshipping the Lord with us— so long as you are not a Christian, so long as you have not yet acknowledged your sin and guilt before the Lord, called upon Jesus to save you from your sins, and promised to follow the Lord and keep his commandments, you cannot worship him aright. For, as we have said over and again this morning, you cannot really worship the Lord, whatever you may say or sing, unless you are ready to pledge yourself and your loyalty to Him; otherwise, like those long ago Israelites, your life takes back what your words gave in church and the Lord, who looks on the heart, knows it all. Further, until you have experienced God's salvation, you cannot give the Lord your love and thanks for it, and until you have the new heart from him, you cannot offer a sincere and faithful heart to him as a mark of your devotion.

So, we are glad you are with us, but we hope still much more that you will be saved by trusting in Jesus Christ and by submitting yourself to his gracious rule, so that you can worship him in truth alongside of us. The Father seeks such. . .

And, for the rest of you; those who are Christians in fact and indeed, let us pledge ourselves again to a true worship of the Lord, a worship which honors God as the living God who dwells in unapproachable light and who searches the hearts of men; a worship which honors our great salvation as the gift of

God's immeasurable love and the purchase of Christ's agony and death; and which honors the demands of Biblical worship itself—as a personal encounter with the Lord, a personal conversation with him and engagement to be His.

I may as well kneel down
And worship gods of stone,
As offer to the living God
A prayer of words alone.

For words without the heart
The Lord will never hear;
Nor will He to those lips attend
Whose prayers are not sincere.

Lord teach me what I need,
And teach me how to pray,
And do not let me seek thy grace,
Not meaning what I say.

And with prayers like that, Sunday by Sunday, let us prepare our hearts and guard our hearts as we come to the house of God for divine worship—and, putting off all insincerity and hypocrisy, let us pray and work that, by God's grace, we might

Have a foretaste inly given
How they worship God in heaven.