

The Greatest Sin in All the World

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The accusation is often made that the present-day pulpit is weak and uncertain. Furthermore, it is charged that instead of being “a voice in the wilderness,” the modern pulpit has settled down comfortably to become a sounding board for the whims and wishes of the multitudes with itching ears. If the charge is true (and it is), it is because the pulpit is reluctant to grapple with the great issues of life. This hesitancy is born of a desire to escape criticism, and it is a dread of becoming offensive to the finer sensibilities. More often it is due to a cowardly fear to face the raw realities of life and to wrestle with the leviathan of living issues. Instead, the pulpit quotes poetry and sprinkles rose water.

The theater, movies, monthly magazines, weekly periodicals, daily papers, radio, and television all deal with life stripped of its niceties. These instruments for reaching and teaching the masses take the gloves off and wade into the problems faced by men daily. As a result, these agencies are more potent and effective in molding the thoughts of folk.

For those who have sat under the shadow of such a pulpit and for those who have lived such sheltered lives in our churches, the prophecy of Hosea will be shocking and startling. However, I do not want you to be unduly alarmed, for I will not go beyond what is written. For the sake of some timid souls, I shall pull my punches a wee bit. Nevertheless, I am giving this message in the full consciousness that only those who will be offended are those who should be offended. Years ago when I was a boy living in a little town, I recall hearing a country preacher deliver a very homely illustration that was very much to the point. “You know,” he said, “when you throw a rock into a bunch of dogs, it is always the hit dog that hollers.”

The story behind the prophecy of the Old Testament Book of Hosea is the tragedy of a broken home. And to make it worse, it’s the home of one of God’s prophets. The personal experience of the prophet Hosea is the background of his message. It concerns the intimate affairs of his home.

The home is always given top priority in God’s Word. It is the rock foundation of society, the most important unit in the social structure. It is to society and the state, to the church and to the nation, what the atom is to the physical universe. The atom has been called the building block of the universe, and the home is exactly that. You see homes stretching out in these new subdivisions like beads on a chain as you go up one street and down another. The home is the chain of a nation that runs up and down the streets of every city and every town and the highways and byways of the countryside. No chain is stronger than the links that compose it. Similarly, no nation is stronger than the homes which constitute its total population. The home is where we live, move, and have our being. It is in the home that we are truly ourselves. All of us dress up physically and psychologically when we go out, but within the walls of the place called home we remove our masks and show what we really are. And the home life of Hosea provides the background for his message to the nation of Israel.

Because of the strategic position of the home, God has thrown about it certain safeguards to protect it. God has surrounded the home with a wall of instruction due to its importance. He has moved into the home to direct its intimate relationships. Actually, marriage is the very backbone of the home and has received more attention from God than any other institution.

Society never made marriage—it found it. God is the One who made marriage. It was His gift to mankind, and marriage rests upon His direct Word: “Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mark 10:9). God performed the first marriage ceremony. He gave away the first bride. He blessed the first couple. Marriage is more than a legal arrangement, even more than the union of mutual love. It is an act of God. It rests upon His fiat command. Too many young people think that all they need in order to get married is a license and a preacher. But, my friend, they need God. If He doesn’t bless the union, it is not what God planned

marriage to be. Oh, the love that God can bring to a marriage, the love of the man for the woman and the love of the woman for the man!

God has given a drive to the human race to reproduce within the framework of marriage and nowhere else: “And the two shall become one flesh” (Mark 10:8); “Be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). Marriage is a sacred relationship and it is a holy union. The New Testament sums up the mind of God in this matter: “Marriage is honorable among all” (Hebrews 13:4). Therefore, marriage cannot be broken by a legal act, a fit of temper, or self-will. There are only two acts that break marriage—that is, real marriage.

The first factor that breaks marriage is the death of either the husband or the wife.

For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband.
(Romans 7:2)

This is accepted by all Christians as a legitimate breaking of the marriage relationship. But some zealous Christians use Romans 7:2 as the basis for the extreme viewpoint that a divorced person who has a living mate can never remarry. They forget that under the Law the married person who was guilty of fornication or adultery was stoned to death and was somewhere under a pile of rocks. So the innocent party under the Law did not have a living partner. Southern California would be covered with rock piles were the Mosaic Law enforced today!

The second act that breaks a marriage is unfaithfulness on the part of either the husband or the wife. This rips the relationship apart and drives a wedge into that which God has made one. Under the Mosaic system, a man or woman who was guilty of adultery was dealt with summarily. Such perfidy merited death, and it was meted out without mercy. Listen to the Law:

The man who commits adultery with another man’s wife, he who commits adultery with his neighbor’s wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death. (Leviticus 20:10)

Under the Mosaic Law when one was unfaithful that spouse was eliminated, and as a result the other one would be free.

But if the thing is true, and evidences of virginity are not found for the young woman, then they shall bring out the young woman to the door of her father’s house, and the men of her city shall stone her to death with stones, because she has done a disgraceful thing in Israel, to play the harlot in her father’s house. So you shall put away the evil from among you. (Deuteronomy 22:20, 21)

Another item concerning the Law that needs amplification is the reference in Deuteronomy which seems to preclude the man from any charge of guilt. The facts are that the analogy is to Christ and the church. Christ is never under suspicion—the church is. Also, it is true that the Law uses the masculine gender when it means either man or woman. The word is used as a generic term. That is, “mankind” means both men and women. Even today a legal document reads, “The party of the first part ... if *he*” when the party of the first part may actually be a *she*.

In spite of this explanation, there is a sense in which the Bible teaches a double standard. This does not mean there is a high standard for women and a low standard for men, but it does

mean that they are different. This is an established custom that is under attack in our society. Yet every department store has a women's department and a men's department. This line of demarcation is recognized on every level of the social world. I believe that this is a valid distinction. For this same reason, I take my watch to one repairman and my car to another. The watch is a more delicate mechanism and needs the attention of a different mechanic with a different technique.

Woman is made finer than man. Therefore, it is more tragic when she goes wrong than when a man does. It is not that sin in one is worse than in another, but the results are far more detrimental. In my limited ministry, I have seen children overcome the handicap of a ne'er-do-well father, even a drunkard, but I have never seen children turn out right with that kind of mother. The poor performance of a father is a serious handicap for a child, but a good mother can more than compensate. Mother is the center of the home. A godly mother said some time ago, when she refused to accept an office in a church organization, "I am a missionary to the nursery, and there are three pairs of eyes watching me. I want to direct them to God." It is more tragic when a woman goes wrong than when a man goes wrong.

Alan Beck's definition of a little girl will, I believe, give a fitting and intrinsic estimation of what I mean:

Little girls are the nicest things that can happen to people. They are born with a bit of angel-shine about them, and, though it wears thin sometimes, there is always enough left to lasso your heart—even when they are sitting in the mud, or crying temperamental tears, or parading up the street in mother's best clothes.

A little girl can be sweeter (and badder) oftener than anyone else in the world. She can jitter around, and stomp, and make funny noises and frazzle your nerves, yet just when you open your mouth, she stands there demure with that special look in her eyes. A girl is Innocence playing in the mud, Beauty standing on its head and Motherhood dragging a doll by the foot.

God borrows from many creatures to make a little girl. He uses the song of a bird, the squeal of a pig, the stubbornness of a mule, the antics of a monkey, the spryness of a grasshopper, the curiosity of a cat, the speed of a gazelle, the slyness of a fox, the softness of a kitten. And to top it off, He adds the mysterious mind of a woman.

A little girl likes new shoes, party dresses, small animals, first grade, noisemakers, the girl next door, dolls, make-believe, dancing lessons, ice cream, kitchens, coloring books, make-up, cans of water, going visiting, tea parties, and one boy. She doesn't care so much for visitors, boys in general, large dogs, hand-me-downs, straight chairs, vegetables, snowsuits, or staying in the front yard.

She is loudest when you are thinking, the prettiest when she has provoked you, the busiest at bedtime, the quietest when you want to show her off, and the most flirtatious when she absolutely must not get the best of you again. Who else can cause you more grief, joy, irritation, satisfaction, embarrassment, and genuine delight than this combination of Eve, Salome, and Florence Nightingale.

She can muss up your home, your hair, and your dignity—spend your money, your time, and your patience—and just when your temper is ready to crack, her sunshine peeks through and you’ve lost again. Yes, she is a nerve-racking nuisance, just a noisy bundle of mischief. But when your dreams tumble down and the world is a mess—when it seems you are pretty much of a fool after all—she can make you a king when she climbs on your knee and whispers, “I love you best of all!”

May I say to you, friends, what a tragedy it is when that precious little girl becomes a woman who goes wrong. It is the worst thing that can happen in a home.

The prophecy of Hosea must be contrasted with God’s ideal of marriage and of womanhood. God’s revelation of marriage and His controls for it must be written in letters of light over the sordid story of Hosea’s experience. Light on dark is the most effective method of contrast. Some years ago, many of our freeway markers and street signs were changed and enlarged. Instead of black letters on a white background, the new signs used white letters on a dark background. This is God’s method also. He writes His revelation and salvation on the black background of man’s sin. God’s high standard must be written over Hosea’s home; only then will we catch the message.

Hosea’s Home

Now we are prepared to examine the story behind the headlines in Hosea. In the hill country of Ephraim, in one of the many little towns not found on the maps of the world, lived two young people. One was a boy by the name of Hosea, the other was a girl by the name of Gomer. I would guess that they fell in love—the same story which has been repeated millions of times, but never grows old. Then the girl went bad for some unexplained reason. To suggest any explanation is to speculate. She even resorted to the oldest profession known to mankind. Hosea was brokenhearted, and shame filled his soul. He must have thought about his recourse to the Mosaic Law. He could have brought her before the elders of the town and demanded the Law be enforced. In that case she would have been stoned, for she had betrayed him. He would have been justified.

Does this remind you of another story that occurred in these same hills seven hundred years later? Another young man by the name of Joseph was engaged to a young lady named Mary. He thought of putting her away privately instead of publicly stoning her. But Mary was innocent of any wrongdoing. Gomer was not. There was no question of Gomer’s guilt as far as the record is concerned.

The Book of Hosea opens at this juncture of the story. It opens with the most startling and shocking statement in the entire Bible:

When the LORD began to speak by Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea: “Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the LORD.” (Hosea 1:2)

Some have not been willing to concede this as the actual experience of the prophet and have dismissed this strong language by calling it all an allegory. Such trifling with the Word of God waters it down to a harmless solution that is more sickening than stimulating. Let’s face it—God commanded Hosea to break the Mosaic Law! The Law said to stone her, but God said, “Go,

marry her.” The thing God commanded Hosea to do must have caused him to revolt in every fiber of his being. Where would God find a godly man today who would go that far with Him?

Hosea did not demur—he obeyed explicitly. He took Gomer in holy wedlock, and he gave her his name. She came into his home as his wife. In the New Testament we read:

Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For “the two,” He says, “shall become one flesh.” (1 Corinthians 6:16)

You may be sure that the tempo of gossip was stepped up in their hometown. Someone has said that God made the country, man made the city, but the devil made the little town. The gossip of folk in a little town is cruel and brutal, although they don’t mean it to be. The mistake of an individual is known by all and forgotten by none. Hosea’s home became a desert island in a sea of criticism such as, “Can you imagine Hosea as God’s man—and look whom he has married!” What a tragic and awful thing took place there. It was segregation with a vengeance, for that man and his wife were shut off from society in that little town. A case of leprosy in the home would not have broken off contact with the outside world more effectively. Poor Hosea!

Into that home children were born. There were three, two boys and one girl. God named each of them, and the meaning of their names tells the awful story. And there is also the larger meaning and message for the nation Israel.

Jezreel was the oldest. His name means, “God will scatter.” The reference is directly to a brutality in the life of Jehu for which there was no repentance (see 2 Kings 10). God is saying through this child Jezreel, “God will scatter Israel.” But there will be mercy in His judgment, for there always is.

The second child was Lo-Ruhamah, which means “unpitied,” implying that she never knew a father’s pity. It was not that she was an orphan, but there was a question about who her father was. What a scandal in the home of Hosea. But I want to say to you, it was a message for the nation! That generation of Israel would not know the pity of God, but God would remember to be gracious to a later generation that He could call His own.

The last child was Lo-Ammi, which means “not my people.” There is something very insinuating here that I feel should be mentioned. If you put this in the singular, it would mean “not my child.” Hosea here is frankly revealing the scandal of his home. Oh, God was speaking to the nation, that nation which had apostatized and departed from Him. He was saying to them, as when the Pharisees came to the Lord Jesus and said, “We are Abraham’s descendants,” our Lord replied, “You are of your father the devil”—you are illegitimate (see John 8:39-44).

Oh, how many church members are saying, “We are the children of God,” but they are illegitimate! They are not His children at all. People say today that there is the “universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man.” That is the biggest lie and the most damnable heresy that has ever been turned loose in this world. Our Lord said to the religious leaders, “You are of your father the devil.” God says, “But as many as received Him [the Lord Jesus Christ], to them He gave the right to become children of God”—even to those who don’t do any more or less than simply “believe in His name” (John 1:12). It is when you believe and receive the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior that you become a child of God. And until you have come to Him as a sinner and have accepted Him as your Savior who paid the penalty for your sins, you are an illegitimate child. You are Lo-Ammi, “not My child.” How tragic it is to be deceived!

In the home of Hosea these three children tell its sad story, and in the larger sphere they depict the declension of the northern kingdom of Israel, which is called Ephraim in the Book of Hosea.

This does not end the record. Gomer ran away from home. She returned to her former profession and became a common prostitute. You would think that now God would say, "Hosea, you have given her a chance, and obviously she is not going to be a faithful wife to you. You loved her and she betrayed you. Now I'll permit you to give her up." But God didn't say that.

Then the Lord said to me, "Go again, love a woman who is loved by a lover and is committing adultery, just like the love of the Lord for the children of Israel, who look to other gods and love the raisin cakes of the pagans." (Hosea 3:1)

As women of this sort did in those days, she had sold herself into slavery:

So I bought her for myself for fifteen shekels of silver, and one and one-half homers of barley. (Hosea 3:2)

It would indeed be gratifying to be able to say that she became a good wife and mother and they lived happily ever after. Certainly, by inference, that is the conclusion that I drew, since the analogy is to Israel:

For the children of Israel shall abide many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred pillar, without ephod or teraphim. Afterward the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. They shall fear the Lord and His goodness in the latter days. (Hosea 3:4, 5)

Finally God will triumph with the nation. The victory of love is the theme of the Book of Hosea.

Prepared to Preach

This concludes the personal history of Hosea. It is a sordid and sorry account of the domestic affairs of God's prophet. For the sake of poetic justice, perhaps we should say that Hosea saved his home. This, however, is not the purpose of recording his experience. God was disciplining this man to speak on His behalf to a nation that was guilty of spiritual adultery. Out of a home scarred by shame, this man stepped before the nation with a message of fire! He stood before his people with a heartbreak that was intolerable, with scalding tears coursing down his cheeks, an ache of soul and a shame of spirit, to *denounce* a people who were guilty of religious harlotry! He walked out of a home broken by sin and scandal; a home saddened, soiled, and sullied by the ugliness of sin. And I like what Dean Plumptre wrote years ago—as though Hosea were speaking:

*Now I sit
All lonely, homeless, weary of my life,
Thick darkness round me, and the stars all dumb
That erst had sung their wondrous tale of joy.
And thou hadst done it all, O faithless one!
O Gomer! Whom I loved as never wife*

*Was loved in Israel, all the wrong is thine!
Thy hand hath spoiled all my tender vines,
Thy foot hath trampled all my pleasant fruits,
Thy sin hath laid my honor in the dust.*

Hosea was God's man who denounced the nation and declared a verdict of guilty for the crime of crimes. He said simply but specifically that sin is as black as can be and that God will punish sin wherever He finds it.

Yet God loves the sinner. When a nation acknowledges God and turns to Him, is blessed of Him and experiences His love, then subsequently turns from Him to idols, the sin of that nation is labeled spiritual harlotry.

God took Israel out of Egypt. He led its people through the wilderness, and His own explanation was:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself.” (Exodus 19:4)

Yet this people made themselves a golden calf to worship and turned away from the God who loved them. At that time, God brought them back to Himself.

Many years later after the kingdom of Israel divided, the northern kingdom—to whom Hosea was speaking—made two golden calves and again turned to calf worship. And again God attempted to woo them back to Himself, but they would not. The charge made repeatedly against them was that they went whoring after other gods. Candidly stated, the charge was that Israel was playing the harlot. This is sin at its worst. However, I don't want to be misunderstood. I am not suggesting the sensational idea that the breaking of the seventh commandment is the chief sin—that's not it.

What is the Greatest Sin?

I am now ready to ask the question and attempt to answer it: “What is the greatest sin in all the world?” Well, in the past, two have been suggested which are worth consideration as the greatest. One is unbelief. Many say that unbelief is absolutely the greatest sin. It is true that there is no remedy for unbelief. God has a remedy for all sin, but unbelief means to reject the remedy. Nevertheless, multitudes are in unbelief because they have never heard that the Son of God has paid the penalty for their sins. When they hear, they will believe. Others have honest doubts. The honest doubter is a rare specimen, but I myself came that route, and I believe that all who have an honest doubt will eventually come to faith in Christ. God is prepared to deal with them. It is the dishonest doubter who gives one excuse when he has a different one in his heart—God will not deal with him. Unbelief is not the greatest sin.

Others hold that sin against light is the chief sin. This is coming close, but it misses the mark. Surely the people of Israel had light, and light does add to the exceeding sinfulness of sin—God dealt with them on that basis. In the economy of God, it is difficult to say that there is one sin that is worse than any other when God says:

For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. (James 2:10)

Our Lord Himself said that when the Holy Spirit comes, “He will convict the world of sin ... because they do not believe in Me” (John 16:8, 9). And if a man or nation has had the light of God and then rejects it, that makes their sin worse. The sin of America is worse than the sin of China. I would much rather be an idolater in the darkness of some tropical jungle, bowing down in fear before an idol, than to be a cynic who sits within the sound of the gospel in any Bible-believing church from Sunday to Sunday without responding to God’s invitation and without receiving the light of heaven. Yes, sin against light is heinous. There is, however, a sin that is even greater.

The greatest sin in all the world is sin against love. This is sin at its worst, and this is the revelation of Hosea. Gomer was not only guilty of breaking the marriage vow, but she sinned against the one who loved her. That is unspeakable. That is worse than the animism and animalism of the heathen world. It is deeper and darker than the immorality of the underworld and the demonism of the overworld. Hosea knew what sin was, and he knew what love was. He knew what the greatest sin in all the world was from personal experience.

Hosea walked out before the nation of Israel to give them God’s message and could say in substance, “I know how God feels. God’s heart is broken. I know because my heart is broken. I have loved this woman, but she betrayed me. And God loves you, and you have betrayed Him.” That is sin at its worst. You can’t get any lower than that, my beloved. Sin against love aggravates sin. Israel had known the love of God. She had experienced His deliverance, His redemption, His protection, His forgiveness, His revelation, and His unconditional love. Israel turned to dumb idols and gave herself to them. This was sin against love, and nothing was worse. But God would not give her up; love will triumph!

God says, that He will get the victory. The story is told in three verses in the Book of Hosea.

Here is the charge:

“Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone.” (Hosea 4:17)

God says to Hosea, “Let them alone. They’ve gone after idols,” but Hosea could say, “O Lord, You sent me out to get Gomer and bring her back; what are You going to do with these people?” God says, “I’ll go get them.”

Here is the pulsating passion of our God:

“How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.” (Hosea 11:8)

In essence God says, “My thought was to judge you and to scatter you, even now,” but He says, “I love you too much, and I am sending Hosea to you again. He knows how I feel because I’ve let him feel the same way. He will tell you that I love you in spite of all your failure, in spite of committing the worst sin of all, sinning against My love.”

Here is victory:

“Ephraim shall say, ‘What have I to do anymore with idols?’ I have heard and observed him. I am like a green cypress tree; Your fruit is found in Me.” (Hosea 14:8)

In other words, “I’ll no longer play the harlot, I’m through with idols. I’ll be faithful to God.” There will come a day when Israel will turn from idols back to God. And may I say, this has a message for our day.

When a young couple has made shipwreck of their marriage and then comes to me, my first inquiry concerns their personal relationship. Recently a young couple came to me with their problem. I asked them if they still loved each other. Tears filled their eyes, and they confessed eagerly that they did. It is unnecessary to say that they are working out their problem. When love is gone, it looks hopeless, but with love there is hope.

Does this shocking description of spiritual adultery fit the church? The church is described as the bride of Christ: “I have betrothed you ... that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11:2). To the Ephesian church our Lord said, “I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Revelation 2:4). It is also interesting to note that the Hebrew name Hosea means “salvation” and is another form of the name Joshua. The Hebrew name Joshua in the Old Testament is in the Greek form Jesus in the New Testament:

“You shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”
(Matthew 1:21)

Therefore, Jesus is the modern Hosea and the church is the bride of Christ. But is she faithful to Him today? Playing and toying with the world even now, she is being molded into its lifestyle and has become lukewarm in her relationship with Christ. Our Lord Jesus said to the church of Laodicea, which I’m convinced represents the church of the present hour:

“I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.” (Revelation 3:15, 16)

In other words, He says, “You are playing the harlot.” Does that disturb you? The harlotry of worldliness is the besetting sin of the church today.

Now let us bring this down to the individual. What is your personal relationship with Jesus Christ? Has a cloud come between you and Him? Has some sin eclipsed His presence? Are you indifferent? Are you trying to compensate by criticizing or turning to some feverish service? Before the Lord Jesus put Simon Peter in harness, He asked the heart-searching question, “Do you love Me?” This is just as poignant and pertinent now as it was that early dawn by the Sea of Galilee, for He calls you by name today. He is not interested in your service or the outward testimony you are giving. He is asking you in your heart of hearts, “Do you love Me?”