

VI. *Repentance That Does Not Count*

11-Jan-04

Hosea 6:1-7:2

Bentley Chapter 9

Theme: True repentance requires confession of sin, turning away from sin, turning toward God for forgiveness, acknowledgement of God as Lord, and restoration of fellowship with Him.

Key Verse: Hosea 6:1-4 – ¹Come, and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up. ²After two days He will revive us; on the third day He will raise us up, that we may live in His sight. ³Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord. His going forth is established as the morning; He will come to us like the rain, like the latter and former rain to the earth. ⁴‘O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away.’

Review

Last week we looked at Hosea chapter 5. In the first seven verses, Hosea continues to hammer home the theme that the corrupt religious life of Israel has led to a corrupt society. Spiritual harlotry (infidelity, apostasy) has led to physical harlotry and other sins. Israel is ensnared in their sin and unable to repent – their deeds do not permit them to turn to God. Although they no longer know the Lord, He still knows them and their wicked deeds, their prideful hearts, and their empty and vain religion. We need to realize that being religious does not equal being righteous. The Israelites were religious, but their hearts were far from God. Let us be careful to realize that outward exercises of religion – church attendance, Sunday school attendance, etc. are no guarantee of a right relationship with God. We need to approach our worship of God with humility and repentance. God knows our deeds. Are they turning us toward Him, or are they turning us away from Him?

In verses 8-11, we saw how Judah took advantage of Israel’s troubles with Assyria to do their own land-grab. While Israel’s troubles are certainly well-deserved and the consequence of their sins, it does not justify Judah’s actions. As a result, God chastises Judah. We should not rejoice when other Christian denominations or individual churches are suffering, declining, falling away from the true faith. We should not circle around them like vultures, hoping to pick off a few members for our own congregation. Instead, we should weep when the cause of Christendom is pushed back, on whatever front. Likewise, we should rejoice in the successes of other denominations and other local churches when they are growing in faith and in the proclamation of the Word. Our loyalty is to the cause of Christ.

In the final section, verses 12-15, we see God’s judgment descend upon Israel and Judah as a moth and as a lion. Because they refuse to repent and continue on in their false worship and wicked deeds, God allows them to decay, to deteriorate, to rot. As a consequence, they have the opportunity to repent, but instead of seeking the Lord, they seek the “great king” of Assyria. They act as if their problems were only a matter of political circumstances that needed to be addressed. In reality, the root cause of their misery is themselves. It is the wrath of God against them that needs to be addressed. Because of their sin, God abandons them in the very depths of their wretchedness and misery. Yet there is a word of hope in closing. Although God withdraws His presence from His people, there is hope in the word “till.” God will remain hidden *until* there is repentance.

Minor Prophets: Hosea

Introduction

And that is the subject of today's study in Hosea chapter 6. Repentance. Certainly we've seen thus far in our study of Hosea the need for repentance. At the close of chapter 5 God says He is going to "hide" from His people until they "acknowledge their offense" and "seek My face." Remember, our overall theme in the book of Hosea is "return to your loving Husband." That's what the people need to do. So the question before us today is this: Do God's people truly repent of their sins? Let's take a look.

Exposition

A. True Repentance? (6:1-3)

"Come and let us return to the Lord; for He has torn, but He will heal us; He has stricken, but He will bind us up" (1). "Let us know, let us pursue the knowledge of the Lord" (3a). Well, it sure sounds as if Israel has been paying attention. There are several references back to chapter 5 in this "song of repentance." Consider first the end of 5:15 – "Then *they will seek* My face; in their affliction *they will earnestly seek* Me" (5:15b). It sure sounds like that is what is happening here in the first line of verse 1 – they are coming and returning to the Lord. In 5:14, God tore up the nation like a raging lion: "For I will be like a lion to Ephraim; And like a young lion to the house of Judah. I, even *I, will tear them* and go away; I will take them away, and no one shall rescue." In the second line of 6:1, the people recognize they have been torn. Further, in the third line of verse 1 they recognize that they have been stricken and wounded, similar language to the imagery of the moth in 5:12-13a – "Therefore I will be to Ephraim like a moth, and to the house of Judah like rottenness. When Ephraim saw his *sickness*, and Judah saw his *wound ...*". Finally, in verse 3, there is a call to knowledge, to pursue the knowledge of the Lord. As the NIV puts it: "Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge Him" (3 NIV). This is the very core of their problem, as described in 5:4 – "They do not direct their deeds toward turning to their God, for the spirit of harlotry is in their midst, and they *do not know* the Lord." It seems as if the folks have been listening to Hosea.

So, the question before us this morning is this: Did Israel truly repent of their sins? Why or why not?

On balance, I believe that the repentance described here in Hosea 6:1-3 is not genuine. It is not true repentance. It is repentance that does not count. On the surface, it does seem genuine. The people of God had suffered, and they called out to God, perhaps with intensity and fervor. They even used the correct vocabulary. They still remembered Biblical words such as "return" or "acknowledge." And these are certainly important elements in repentance. Repentance involves a returning to God and an acknowledgement of Him as Lord. However, there are two critical elements of repentance that appear to be missing here. And without these elements, the repentance is not real, it does not count.

Those two elements are confession of sin and forsaking the sin. Did you hear any confession of sin in verses 1-3? Did they even acknowledge they had sinned? No. What they recognize is the *consequences* of their sin. They had been torn and stricken. They need healing, binding, reviving, and raising up. They want God's blessing like the latter and former rains. But what they don't want is to talk about how they got in the mess they were in. They've missed the most important point in 5:15 – "I will return again to My place *till they acknowledge their offense*" (5:15a). Hubbard puts it this way: "This song of feeble penitence was crafted to meet God's terms of 5:15. Yet the crucial requirement of 'admitting their guilt' (5:15) has been omitted.

Minor Prophets: Hosea

They have faced their woundedness (6:2; *cf.* 5:12-13) but not their waywardness. Healing is sought, even resurrection, but no specific sin is mentioned.”

Let me touch on this idea of resurrection. In verse 1, the requested relief is healing their illnesses and bandaging their wounds. But verse 2 takes it up a notch. Here, the patient Israel is not merely ill or injured, she is unconscious and dying. She needs to be revived and even resurrected. Truly Israel was dead in their trespasses and sins and needed to be revived to new life. This is something that only the power of God can do – to restore dead sinners to life through Jesus Christ. (Eph. 2:5-6 – “Even when we were dead in trespasses, [He] made us alive together with Christ {by grace you have been saved}, and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.”). Furthermore, some commentators see in the reference to a third-day resurrection a prefiguring of Christ’s resurrection on the third day. As Kidner puts it: “When Paul finds, apparently, not only the resurrection but even ‘the third day’ to be ‘in accordance, with the scriptures’ (1 Cor. 15:4), it is at least possible — though one should put it no higher— that this passage as well as ‘the sign of Jonah’ was in his mind.”

Now back to the incomplete repentance. The second element that is missing from this confession is forsaking the sin. Obviously, if they don’t even acknowledge the sin in the first place, it’s a bit tough to turn away from it. Israel wanted God’s favor, but without God’s rules. They wanted a relationship with God on their own terms. They wanted to be married to God, but they wanted a little extra on the side, if you get my meaning. We will see as we continue to read in verses 4 and beyond that God is still not pleased with the deeds and attitudes of the people of Israel. Israel’s repentance seemed genuine on the surface. They truly were sorry that they were being punished by God. But they weren’t sorry for their sin, and they intended to keep on sinning as long as they could. All they wanted was the punishment to go away, not for their hearts and behaviors to change in order to restore a right relationship with God.

A consequence of this incomplete repentance is how it affects our attitude toward God. Bentley puts it this way: “The people appear to be just taking it for granted that if they return to God, then He will say, ‘Welcome back. Never mind about your sin. It doesn’t matter.’ But that is not what the Word of God teaches us. Our sin *does* matter.” In essence, what the people of Israel were saying was this: “If we mouth the right words, God is required to restore us. It doesn’t matter what is in our heart. It doesn’t matter whether or not we intend to turn away from our sin. It is God’s business and nature to restore us. ‘He has torn us, but He will heal us.’” This attitude leads toward a callous presumptuousness about God. God becomes a giant “forgiveness machine.” All we have to do is pull the right lever, and we get the result we want. God is no longer our Creator and Lord to be worshipped; He has become a tool to be used or manipulated.

A post-Christian society is one that has lost its perspective on who God is. Maybe we go to church for weddings or baptisms, for Christmas or Easter, or for burying our dead, but otherwise God and church are not very relevant. In the news article I read last week, this attitude was very clear in the French priest’s discussion on pre-marital counseling of six couples, all of whom were already living together. While the couples he cited still wanted a “church” wedding, they obviously had no need for the teachings of the church. The church was a convenience, to be used or ignored according to their needs and wishes. They were treating God as a tool to be used, as a name to be invoked to bless a wedding; but nothing more – “please don’t lecture us on how God wants us to live!” When our repentance becomes mechanical and insincere, then our lifestyles reflect it.

Minor Prophets: Hosea

Obviously there are important lessons for us here. Repentance involves a turning away from sin, a forsaking of sin, and a turning toward God, to acknowledge Him and His righteousness, with the aim of restoring a right relationship with Him. Repentance that only says, “I’m sorry I got caught with my hand in the cookie jar” is no real repentance at all. It is a mechanical manipulation; an effort to avoid the pain of sin while retaining its pleasure. We see this behavior in our children all the time. And God sees this same behavior in His children. We are really no different. And so we need the reminder that for repentance to be real, we must turn away from sin and turn toward Christ.

B. Morning Mist (6:4-6)

Continuing on, we see that as God considers the deeds of His people, He sounds just like an exasperated parent. “O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you?” (4a). In our household, it sounds like this: “O Hannah, what am I going to do with you? O Michaela, what am I going to do with you?”

Remember back in 4:1 the accusation or charge that God brings against His people? As the NIV puts it: “There is no *faithfulness*, no *love*, no *acknowledgment of God* in the land” (4:1b NIV). Well, here in chapter 6, verses 4-6 and on into 7, we see that these same three things are still missing. So much for the repentance in verses 1-3!

As an aside, let me just remark that there is some confusion in the different translations (NKJV, NIV, etc.) on the translation of some of these key words. You may have noticed that I have referred multiple times to the NIV translation. I usually use the NKJV, but I’ve found as I’ve gone through this study that often times the NIV is more consistent in its translation of some of these key words. For example, in verse 4 the NKJV says “for your *faithfulness* is like a morning cloud,” but the NIV has it as “Your *love* is like the morning mist.” This word is the same word as the second item in the accusation of 4:1. The NKJV has it there as *mercy* while the NIV has it as *love*. So, I don’t go back and forth between the NIV and NKJV to be confusing, but in an attempt to be more consistent. But I digress.

The first thing that is still missing in the land is *love for God*. “Your *love* is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears” (4, NIV). Boice elaborates: “This does not mean that the people have a genuine love for God but only that what they do have does not stand the test of time. It means that this ‘love’ is inadequate. In fact, it is so inadequate it cannot really be called love. What the people of Israel probably had in this period was an emotional attachment to the ancient God of their fathers, much the way some people today consider themselves ‘Christians’ because of the genuine faith of their parents or grandparents.” Remember the news article I read last week? 85% of Italians consider themselves Catholics, yet the vast majority of them pay no attention to the pope or the doctrines of their religion. Lack of love for God and for the things of God is one of the characteristics of a post-Christian society.

In light of this lack of love, verse 5 is a description of how God had already been dealing with His people. “Therefore, I have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of My mouth; and your judgments [i.e., My judgments on you] are like light that goes forth” (5). God had sent prophets like Hosea to proclaim His word to the people. Notice how powerful and deadly God’s word is. God’s word is His sword: “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb. 4:12). And

Minor Prophets: Hosea

here we have in Hosea 6:5 a description of the power of that sword of God. God speaks and all of the calamities that befall Israel come to pass.

The second thing that is still missing is *acknowledgement of God*. Now, this seems at first to be a strange thing to say. Didn't the people just confess in verse 1, "Let us acknowledge the Lord; let us press on to acknowledge him" (1, NIV)? But like most things involved in this pseudo-repentance, their efforts were misplaced. Apparently, Israel felt that if they performed the outward rituals of their organized religion, it would be sufficient. But God is not so easily satisfied. "For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and *acknowledgement of God* more than burnt offerings" (6, NIV). It appears as if they are trying to *appease* God with their animal sacrifices, rather than *please* Him with their heart attitude. This is the same posture we saw last week: "With their flocks and herds they shall go to seek the Lord, but they will not find him" (5:6). Mindless practice of empty religious rituals accomplishes nothing. God is not interested in the external ceremonies of a vain religion; He is interested in the internal heart attitude. That Italian man I quoted last week who when running instead of going to church on Sunday had one thing right: "I don't see how something like a confession and a few repetitions of the 'Hail Mary' are going to solve any problems." God desires an inward change of heart, not an external compliance with ritual. True knowledge of God comes through confession of sin, practice of righteousness, and a transformation of the heart.

This is the same message that the prophet Samuel told to King Saul: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). Likewise, Jesus Christ quoted Hosea 6:6 not once but twice: "When Jesus heard that, He said to them, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means: *'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.'*" For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance'" (Mt. 9:12-13). "But if you had known what this means, *'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,'* you would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mt. 12:7-8). Christ requires true heart-devotion to Him and His word, not lip-service to man-ordained ceremonies. How do you approach your worship of God? Is it mechanical, perfunctory, going through the motions? Or is it heart-felt, real, and devoted to Christ?

C. The Road to Shechem (6:7-7:2)

The third thing that is still missing is *faithfulness*. This is the theme of our final section, and it is introduced in verse 7: "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant—they were unfaithful to me there" (7, NIV).

This section is a bit confusing. The first confusing item is in verse 7. The NKJV says, "But like *men* they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt treacherously with Me." Remember, the NIV says, "Like *Adam* ..." The Hebrew word here is *Adam*, which can be the proper name of the first man, but also means mankind. To further complicate things, it could also refer to a place name – the city of Adam located along the Jordan river north of Jericho. It is mentioned in Joshua in connection with the children of Israel crossing the Jordan river: "The waters which came down from upstream stood still, and rose in a heap very far away at *Adam*, the city that is beside Zaretan" (Jos. 3:16). Given the second phrase of the verse ("they were unfaithful to me *there*"), the most likely interpretation of this verse makes *Adam* out to be the place name of the town on the Jordan River. The town of Adam is located in *Gilead*, which is the region of land east of the Jordan River. It is located parallel to the city of *Shechem* in Ephraim. Thus, Adam of Gilead would have been the crossing point of the Jordan River on the road to Shechem.

Minor Prophets: Hosea

The scenario of these verses (6:7-7:2) seems to be something like this. Hosea is reciting the failures of God's people. Despite their "attempt" at repentance at the beginning of chapter 6, Hosea says that the three indictments of chapter 4 (no faithfulness, no love of God, no knowledge of God) are still true. Hosea has already spoken of their ephemeral love of God – it has vanished like the morning fog or early dew. He has already addressed their lack of knowledge – they thought that God could be bought off by empty rituals – how little did they really know their holy God! And now, Hosea is giving us a concrete example of their unfaithfulness. I believe that it is best to take all of these verses (6:7-7:2) together as describing a single incident that would have been well known to the readers and listeners of Hosea's day. It might have been front page news in the *Samaria Post* and the *Jerusalem Times* although we don't know about it today. There was an incident at Adam (7), in the region of Gilead (8), on the road to Shechem (9) that illustrates how Israel has broken faith with the covenant of God.

What happened on the road to Shechem? Murder most foul! A band of robbers, a group of marauders, a gang of highwaymen have ambushed travelers on the road to Shechem and murdered them. But these are no ordinary thugs committing these crimes. Hosea describes them as "the company of priests" (9). Can you understand the outrage? Do you see the scandal? Here are a group of priests, of clergymen, of church leaders conducting themselves in this outrageous fashion. Instead of leading the people of God in worship and in teaching them the Word of God, they are called "evildoers" and are guilty of terrible crimes. Hosea says, "Surely they commit lewdness. I have seen a horrible thing in the house of Israel: there is the harlotry of Ephraim; Israel is defiled. Also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed for you" (9b-11a).

Hubbard describes the crimes in this way: "The cluster of indictments may reflect a regular pattern of brigandage in which travelers were assaulted and robbed by priests. More likely it encapsulates a momentous event in which priests collaborated in a conspiracy, perhaps against the royal family. Gilead was remembered as the launching site for at least one such plot: the *coup d'etat* against Pekahiah (2 Ki. 15:25)." Hosea may in fact be describing some type of attack on the royal family. As we will see next week, there were regular plots against the kings of Israel during the last 30 years of her existence. Four of the last kings of Israel were assassinated and replaced by their assassin. That may be why it was so memorable to his readers and needed no more detailed explanation. It may be the same kind of "shorthand" we use to day when we say "9/11" to refer to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. We all know what happened, and so "9/11" is an easy "code" to refer to all of those events.

And so, Israel (and Judah) are still guilty of having no love of God, no knowledge of Him, and no faithfulness to His covenant. Even if God were inclined to do something positive, to heal them from their illness, as they had requested back in 6:1, there was this "little" matter of all the unconfessed sin. God says, "Whenever I would restore the fortunes of My people, whenever I would heal Israel, the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria are revealed" (6:11b-7:1a, NIV). [Note that the first line of 7:1 is the parallel thought to the second half of 6:11, although separated by an unfortunate chapter division.] Israel has done nothing to repent of their crimes. Their repentance of 6:1-3 is a sham.

Remember, in Hosea 4 the priests were indicted by God for their faithless leadership. Under their tutelage, the people had forgotten their knowledge of God (4:6). That is exactly what God desires, that His people have a knowledge of God, much more so than empty rituals or sacrifices (6:6). That was the priests' responsibility. They continued to conduct worthless religious rituals,

Minor Prophets: Hosea

while failing in the weightier points of the law. “They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets; but they do not realize that I remember all their evil deeds. Their sins engulf them; they are always before Me” (7:1b-2, NIV). Back in 4:1 God had made the indictment on the sins of omission. He then listed multiple sins of commission in 4:2. And here at the end of chapter 6 and beginning of chapter 7, we see that the priests are leading the pack in these sins. “By swearing and lying [fraud – 7:1], killing [murder – 6:9] and stealing [thief, band of robbers – 7:1] and committing adultery [harlotry – 6:10], they break all restraint, with bloodshed upon bloodshed” (4:2). How foolish they were to think that they could commit these crimes and hide them before the Omniscient God, the Holy One of Israel? And so this final section of our study today illustrates most graphically the unfaithfulness of God’s people, led by the priests, to the covenant of God.

The Pharisees of Christ’s day were the same. They kept all of their useless traditions, but they ignored the most important matters of the Law. That is the theme of Christ’s excoriation of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!” (Mt. 23:23-24). Perhaps the most condemning woe against them is this: “But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in” (Mt. 23:13).

The Pharisees of Christ’s day were guilty of the same thing as the priests of Hosea’s day. They were guilty of false leadership. Through their laws and traditions, the Pharisees shut up the kingdom of heaven against men. They made it impossible for one to understand what true religion was. They majored on the minors, and left out the important matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. Those who followed the teaching of the Pharisees were doomed, because it did not touch the matters of the heart, only the empty externals of a dead religion. Although the priests of Hosea’s day seemed to have an external wickedness that exceeded that of the Pharisees, on the inside they were exactly the same: they were like “whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead man’s bones and all uncleanness” (Mt. 23:27). In addition to the outrageous crimes just outlined in 6:7-7:2, the priests of Hosea’s day were guilty of rejecting the knowledge of the Lord and for not teaching it to the people. The people of Israel may have been well-educated and well off economically, but they were very poor in the knowledge of the Lord. They too followed empty religious customs while ignoring the weightier matters of the Lord: faithfulness and love and knowledge of God.

This is a significant warning for us. Are we faithful to the covenant of God? Do we serve Him with all our hearts? Or do we just give lip service to our worship? Is our conduct befitting one who wears the name of Christ? We may not be outrageous murders and thieves, brigands and adulterers like we see described at the end of Hosea 6 and beginning of Hosea 7. But that doesn’t mean that everything is all right with us. The Pharisees lived outwardly moral lives. They were the local “paragons of virtue.” But that doesn’t stop Christ from looking at their inward heart and finding it as dead as a whitewashed tomb. Christ desires mercy and not sacrifice. He desires the right attitude of a submissive heart rather than the externals of religion: of Sunday school attendance and tithing, of Bible study participation and teaching. Those external things *are* important to the extent that they impact the heart. Is your heart right with God today? When you sin, do you confess your sin and turn away from it? Or do you have a

Minor Prophets: Hosea

repentance that does not admit your sin, a repentance that does not forsake your sin, a repentance like that in Hosea 6, a repentance that does not count?

Conclusion

I've been talking a lot about living in a post-Christian world during this course. Again we can see more characteristics of that society from our study in Hosea today. As I close, let me read you some thoughts on this subject from Michael Eaton, who is pastor of a church in Nairobi, Kenya.

“We become like the God — or the gods — that we worship. People may think that they can remove the worship of God and still have a decent society. Maybe they can — for a short time! But take away the God of the Bible and soon the righteousness of the Bible will disappear also. Society gets steadily worse. A century ago, in ‘the west’, men and women turned aside from the Bible. They were so confident that evolution was about to take them to the pinnacle of glory. The first world war of 1914-1918 shattered their dreams of utopia, but even that was thought to be the ‘war to end all wars.’ What crass ignorance of God, and ignorance of human history! The end of the twentieth century shows the results: great cleverness in technology, but more murders, violence, and broken homes than ever. Lying and immorality are not even regarded as sin at all! Israel thought the nation would last for ever, but they had thirty years left. How many years does the western world have? It is one of the affluent parts of the world, but so was Israel in Jeroboam’s day. The center of gravity of the Christian world is Africa, South America and Indonesia. One can expect Christian influence to steadily grow there as it is steadily declining in the western world. Hosea has a message for us! The murders and the violence, the sex-craze and the lying are signs of how much our society needs the God of the Bible. The need of the hour is not a new political party, not superior technology, not the right foreign policy, or the right relationship in some financial market. Our very survival as a people depends on whether or not spiritual awakening comes.”

As Christians living in a post-Christian world, let us pray that spiritual awakening comes, and that the Church returns to her loving Husband.

Next week: Lesson 7 – Cooking and Flying Lessons – Hosea 7:3-16 – Bentley chapters 10-11

Close in Prayer.