

Jesus > Religion

Relentless Love

Frankton – 9/6/15

Scripture: Hosea 1.2-3 God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute

Proposition: In spite of our chasing other gods, our God continues to pursue us.

This story is something of a chick flick. You know what I'm talking about. Guy falls in love with girl and pursues her until she says yes. But this story is more than a chick-flick. It's a love story that was written about twenty-five hundred years ago. It's a real story, not some Disney movie or Lifetime TV show. It involves pain and infidelity, yet grace can be found in the middle of it all. This story starts with a man named Hosea, who was chosen by God as a prophet. He was a devout and upright man. If Hosea were around today, I'm sure we would see him paying his taxes, walking grandmas across the street, spending his Tuesdays volunteering at the homeless shelter and his Thursdays volunteering as a tutor at the elementary school.

And then something shocking happens. God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute. Here's how scripture puts it: [SLIDE] *Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution.* [2b] Don't you think that's an odd request from the Creator of the universe. Wouldn't you expect God to tell Hosea to marry a good Jewish woman? I'm sure a million thoughts ran through Hosea's mind. "Really? A prostitute?" I have to believe his pride swelled up a little bit. "A prostitute? I deserve better than that. I've been a good guy. Why a prostitute, God?" Nonetheless, he listens and obeys. He finds a prostitute named Gomer. He pursues her and marries her. He enters into an eternal covenant (marriage) with a prostitute.

It would make for a good ending if after marrying Hosea, Gomer did a complete 180 and left her day job, or night job and stopped being a prostitute and found the straight and narrow. The problem is, she didn't. Unfaithfulness wasn't just an action for Gomer, it was a lifestyle. Even after marrying Hosea, she continued to run to those other men. She continued to play the prostitute. She continued to give herself up to anyone with enough money. The last thing we read about Gomer is that Hosea had to buy her back from the slave market. What must have been his range of emotions in that moment: shame, embarrassment, inadequacy? Can you imagine having to buy back your own wife from the slave market? I'm sure she was standing there in the marketplace completely naked. Men cheering, yelling, and holding up coins, bidding on her as if she were a piece of meat. And Hosea standing there with deep anguish, willing to pay the highest price with hope that his wife would just come home.

I'm sure there were moments Hosea railed against God. "I married her! Isn't that enough? Do I really have to keep pursuing her? If she doesn't want me, that's her choice." It was probably right in that moment that God quietly revealed his purpose. He wasn't having Hosea marry Gomer just to make his life miserable. He told Hosea to marry Gomer in hopes that maybe [SLIDE] the nation of Israel would finally see what it was like for God to pursue his people. Israel is the spiritual prostitutes. We are the Israel of today. We give our entire lives on the altar of false gods – money, sex, reputation, work, fame, etc. – and yet God continues to pursue us. He continues to chase us. He continues to woo us. That is the God of the Bible. A God of pursuit. A God of covenant. A God of relentless love and grace.

Jesus > Religion

As a reflection of us, this story isn't very flattering at all. It paints us in pretty ugly light. It paints the picture that we shun the one who loves us. It paints a picture that we can't or won't turn our lives around even for love. But this story is a great reflection of God's true nature. He doesn't just come after us once. He doesn't just save us once. God is like Hosea who even after he married Gomer and was then pushed aside by Gomer, he still went after her to get her back. When God makes a promise to his people, he keeps it. He doesn't leave us and he is relentless in his pursuit of us, even multiple times. His love isn't soft and fuzzy, like some chick-flick love. His love is ferocious, unfailing, undeterred, and jealous.

The best part is that God doesn't force us to marry him or to obey him, but like Hosea, [SLIDE] he powerfully woos us to him. In the same way Hosea brought Gomer back once and for all, fully restored in the marriage despite the messy, gritty, unpleasant events before, so God in Jesus does the same. We run, we rebel, we turn away, but in Jesus we have an anchor. We have been bought. God's love is so potent that, when it finally pierces our heart, we can't help but have transformed hearts. Too many times, people portray God as the ultimate judge, waiting to sentence us for our sins. The truth is, God is a loving husband who woos us with his love while not playing on our fears.

Is that the love you know, or do you obey God out of fear? Both fear and love might cause obedience, but only love causes joy. Fear says, "Do this or else you'll be in trouble." The problem with fear-based Christianity is that we only obey when the fear is there. If you only obey God when you feel threatened by his commands, it's not God you worship, but your fear of God. However, love compels a heart and produces lasting joy and obedience. Hosea's love was so powerful, so relentless that it slowly but surely drew Gomer back into the covenant. Never once did he threaten her with divorce, but instead he just showed more grace.

God's grace is so much more powerful of a motivator than is fear. Love is the deepest motivator. Only love can produce not only willing obedience, but also lasting obedience. If you are being motivated by fear, rules, anger, or some other emotion, it usually only lasts while that emotion is there. Love, being a state of the heart, lasts even past the initial emotion.

One of my favorite things about the grace of God is that rarely in scripture do you see it demand some sort of action as a payback for grace received. [SLIDE] Grace just flows. It's a one-way type of love that runs the conduit directly from God's heart to ours. That kind of grace is scandalous. A lot of non-religiously minded people love to say such things as, "You better watch out. If grace is free then it will produce a ton of hypocrites who take advantage of it. Everyone will just do whatever they want and then say, 'Well, God will forgive me for it.'"

The truth is, yes, you can take advantage of grace. That's what makes it grace. But, only people who see God as their judge, not their father, try to take advantage of grace. When it comes to a lawful or judicial relationship, people will always ask, "How close can I get to the line without getting in trouble?" But rarely does someone ask that same question when it comes to an intimate relationship. How stupid would I look, and would I be, if I asked, "How close can I come to not loving Jan without her divorcing me?" On the contrary, I ask, "How close can I get to Jan." I'm pursuing her, not running from her.

Jesus > Religion

There's an old tale about [SLIDE] Abraham Lincoln buying back a slave from the marketplace, much like Hosea bought back Gomer. He simply saw this woman being sold in slavery and wanted to set her free. He bought the woman, then he started to leave. She quickly followed and asked, "Sir, you bought me. What do you want from me?" Mr. Lincoln told her, "You're free. I just wanted to get you out of slavery. You're free to do whatever you'd like to do now. That's the definition of free." She had trouble grasping that. "Free? Free to do whatever I want?" Lincoln nodded. "Free to be whatever I want?" Again Lincoln nodded. "Free to go wherever I want?" Again Lincoln nodded. Then, with a smile on her face, she said, "If that's the case, then I'm following you."

When you understand how great are the gifts of love and grace that you have been given by Jesus, you can't help but follow him. Since he gave up his life for you, you can't help but give yours back to him. That is the scandal of grace. I believe that as a Christian you can take advantage of grace, but when you've truly tasted it, you never will. When you've experienced the joy and the life of Christ in you, then nothing else is as satisfying anymore. It's not that you want to use his grace to do all the things you used to love to do. It's just that those things no longer are attractive to you now. Now, following Jesus is attractive to you, much as the former slave was attracted to following Mr. Lincoln.

In Greek mythology, [SLIDE] the Sirens were extremely seductive, mermaid-like females who lived on an island and would lure passing boats with their entrancing music and singing. Innocent sailors would follow their voices to the shoals of the island where their boats would be wrecked. In Homer's poem "the Odyssey", sailors stuffed wax in their ears to keep from being seduced by the sirens. In Apollonius's poem, "Argonautica", the sailors are saved when Orpheus begins to play his lyre to drown out the music of the sirens. He did exactly what the sirens did, only his music was louder and more attractive.

Here's the truth about God's grace. It's not like we are stuffing wax in our ears in hopes of not being seduced by the sirens of our old lives and old sins, but rather it's that God grace is such sweet and precious music that it compels us to stay with it. Grace is better music than sin. We don't want to take advantage of it because there is nothing better out there to take advantage of it with. God's grace is an alluring, compelling, stunning and powerful force that invites us to get lost in it. We don't say, "Oh, I better not do that or God will get me." Instead we say, "His grace is so much better than whatever anything else is offering." We don't please God when we white-knuckle or tie ourselves up to our obedience to him. We please him by showing the world just how enjoyable he really is.

The best part about grace is that it changes people. [SLIDE] Real grace loves us right where we are, but it loves us too much to leave us there. Cheap grace – grace which is not really grace at all – is like a horrendous version of love that sees its loved one in danger and simply says, "I love you." That doesn't cut it. We need rescuing. And God does exactly that. We know we've accepted God's transforming grace if we begin to look different. Don't think grace is beyond your grasp. God is offering it to you. It's free. And it's life-giving. Will you trust him?

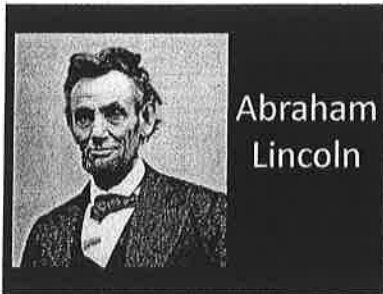
Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution.

Hosea 1.2b

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