

RUF Bible Study – The Minor Prophets
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Hosea – What Is Love?

What is your favorite romantic comedy? *You've Got Mail*? I've never seen it. One of the few movies I have absolutely hated was *My Best Friend's Wedding*. I just couldn't take it. *Sleepless in Seattle* is another classic. Anything with Meg Ryan.²

What about your favorite romantic tragedy? These aren't quite as fun, are they? Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, Hugh Grant and John Cusack don't seem to show up in the tragedies. We enjoy the comedies because they made us laugh in the awkwardness. But the real life dramas are too real, too raw, too hurtful.

I think we get fooled by these romantic comedies. Just like pornography tricks us by giving us a false view of sex and intimacy, making real sex just "bad porn," so romantic comedies can fool us into thinking there is a certain script of love. We buy into that script and think things will just work out when he understands, or comes around, or dumps the girl he thinks he likes, or we get to go on a trip – it'll all work out in the end and we'll be together in each other's arms.

What do you think love is? What love story plays in your head? How do you think it's all going to come together in the end for you?

We're going to be looking at the Minor Prophets this semester. The Minor Prophets aren't usually the most worn sections of our Bibles. How often do you read Amos and Zechariah? How long ago did you quote something from Obadiah? How well do you know the story of Joel? Exactly. Well, count me in your number. I haven't spent much time in those books since I graduated from seminary. But in rereading them, I came across a ton of favorite Bible verses that I'd memorized in the past, and some new ones that I hadn't recognized before.

I want to mention right away how much I appreciate Mark Dever's book, *The Message of the Old Testament*. Dever has done an excellent job in boiling down each of these books into a concise, gospel-driven message. I am grateful to be able to borrow from and pattern my thoughts after his.

These are the last twelve books of what we call the Old Testament. Old doesn't mean better than new. It is all God's word, and all for us. In fact, you cannot really understand the New Testament unless you understand the Old Testament. It is a goldmine for understanding God's riches to us in Christ. All of the Bible talks about Jesus. So we shouldn't neglect these 39 books.

These last twelve books are called the Minor Prophets because they're shorter. It's not like the minor leagues, some sort of lower level prophet trying to work his way up the ladder to eventually make it to "the bigs." If you look at the other prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, you'll see they are long and full. Daniel seems to me to be a transition book between the two, but there is a ton of story/narrative in Daniel so it is of a different nature than what follows.

The Minor Prophets are for us. They are God's word to God's people. And they touch on so many amazing subjects, all pertinent to our time and place. So let's look at Hosea and see how it relates to our situation and our need for God's grace.

Hosea is one of the longest of these short Minor Prophets. 14 whole chapters. We don't know much about Hosea, but he was a prophet of God. This book is the only thing we have from him, so he spent the rest of his time preaching the word of God to God's people in obscurity. He lived in the middle of the 8th century B.C. We know he lived before 722, because that is when Assyria took out and took over Israel, the northern tribe or northern state or section of the people of God (the southern section is called Judah). So these prophecies and this story about the judgment of God's people takes place before this cataclysmic event in 722. Hosea mentions a few of the kings whose reigns he overlapped with, so we can trace it out and get pretty close as to when he lived.

What else do you need to know before we start? This is a book about love. The basic story line is pretty tame and boring – a man married a woman. But whoa, this is not like a romantic comedy – unless maybe a much fuller, darker and more redemptive *Pretty Woman*.

Sin and its effects – it kills relationships, it challenges love

A man marries a woman. We read this in the very first few verses of the book. Some of you are trying to discern God's voice as to whether or not you should marry the woman you're dating. Most of you will encounter this dilemma in the next few or five or ten years.

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Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By Doug Serven, © Doug Serven, 2010, website: www.ouruf.org. For this series, I used commentaries by McComiskey, Boice and Dever, and listened to sermons by as many people as I can find, especially Tim Keller, Jeff Ferguson. The reader should assume that none of the ideas expressed are original to me.

² <http://www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2009/02/the-17-best-romantic-comedies-this-decade.html?p=2>

You sit there and you think, “Should I marry her? Should I buy a ring for her? Is she *the one*?” You ask your friends. You ask your mentors. You try to envision your life together. Hopefully, you also ask God. And hopefully she’s doing the same thing.

And God speaks. Through friends, mentors and through his own still, quiet voice. For Hosea it was a little different. He heard God speak to be sure. What he heard might have been a little surprising: “Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.” (1:2)

Wow. I’m not sure what you think about that, but it is pretty amazing. God is wanting Hosea to live out a sermon in his very life. He commands him to go and love this woman, and he does it.

So let’s talk about Gomer and her sins for a few minutes. “Sin” is a term to mean breaking relationship with God. We often think of it as breaking God’s rules, but that’s just a part of it. Sin is more relational than that.

In this case, God starts to enumerate his people’s sins, and Gomer is a picture of that, an illustration of the broken relationship sin causes. If you keep reading through Hosea, you see what God is talking about as he paints the picture of sin and its ruin.

There is deep corruption. Stubborn rejection of what is good. Ignoring God and his ways. Rebellion and a steeped determination to turn from God, even a contempt for him. This manifests itself in lying, drunkenness, mocking God, being insolent and cursing God, in stealing, murdering and adultery. God’s people are not living lives that please God, not by any means.

The crazy thing is that they haven’t gotten less religious. We often think it’s the religious people who are good, and the irreligious people are bad. At least we tend to think that in Oklahoma. I read in the paper that Oklahoma is the 7th most religious state and 60% of its residents claim to go to church (I find that hard to believe, but maybe once or twice a year 60% of people go to church).

But over and over again the Bible reminds us that we all have religion, and that religion doesn’t save us. God’s own people were still religious, but they were worshipping idols instead of God. They had incorporated other local gods into their own worldview and worship and now had what they thought was a pretty good thing.

This is what the Bible calls idolatry – putting anything in first place besides God himself. Sometimes we read these verses about idolatry and think, “Not a problem – I don’t have one single idol anywhere in my house. I’m good.” But we’re saying idolatry is *anything* you put in first place. It’s not a statue. It’s what you live for. It’s what you’re all about. It’s what you have to have to be happy. Is it a relationship? Is it security? Is it what others think about you, your reputation? Is it your grades or your academic position? Is it a place in your sorority? Is it the job you have to have or the school you have to get into or the score that will set you apart?

These are places and things we actually worship in our hearts. God calls this spiritual adultery, which is a pretty graphic term for something we mostly don’t think is too bad. He calls it whoring around. We are loose with our loves. We sleep with other lovers instead of the one we say we love. We take them into our beds, sometimes sneaking around, but other times brazenly not caring who sees or finds out.

God hates that. God is hurt by that. Our relationships are damaged by our sin. This is why we can’t get along. Because sin ruins things. We hurt each other and say hurtful things. We ignore each other because of the loneliness in our own hearts. We don’t care for each other because we’re so busy or so distracted. Our relationships are marred with sin, with pain, with scars, with distance. I see it all the time in your lives. And I do it to. I do it to you.

God is not happy with this. We often think a loving God would just turn away and leave us alone, but that isn’t love at all. Love demands justice. Love demands the right. You know that, and you want that.

God deals out justice. He is a God of holiness. He calls sin out and says because of this sin they will no longer be his people and no longer receive mercy (those are some serious names for Hosea’s children – I’ll bet they wouldn’t fly if you tried them out for your kids).

This is where we are. Can you see yourself here? It’s a place of truth and sadness, but a place of honesty and possible repentance.

This isn’t talking about “those people out there.” It’s a call of judgment to the church, to God’s people to you and me. Can you recognize the ways and things and places you turn away from God and love other things? Can you see your sin? Can you see your whoring? It’s not a pretty picture.

You’ve been found out. God walked into the room and caught you.

Love and its power – it goes after and enters into brokenness

So what happens now? What happens when God catches us and calls us out? When we see ourselves? Maybe we didn’t get what we wanted? Maybe you wasted a semester sleeping with him and then he broke up with you? Maybe you were caught with pornography? Maybe your friends have abandoned you and you see your idolatry for the first time?

God calls us to repentance. Hosea calls us to repentance. Repentance is seeing where you are, admitting where you are, and seeking to turn to a new way, to walk now to the Father, to walk back home like the prodigal son.

Love is recovered through repentance. That’s how you admit your sin and seek restoration for the relationship. The basic posture is on your knees, saying God have mercy on me, a sinner. I’m so sorry I have done this. Please forgive me.

We see this call to repentance in chapter 6, “*Come let us return to the Lord... Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord.*” Let us return to know God, pressing on to know him.

In 8:5 Hosea instructs the people to put away their calf idols, to spurn them, to get rid of these symbols of other lovers.

In 10:12, we read that we are sow righteousness for ourselves, to break up our fallow ground and seek the Lord.

In 12:6 and 14:1,2 we are instructed to return to the Lord by the help of God himself. Return to God.

The book ends with 14:9 telling us that wise people will walk with God and know him.

So Hosea doesn't just leave us with judgment. He calls us to repentance. He call us to wake up!

Arcade Fire's song should be playing in the background, reminding you:

*Something filled up
My heart with nothing
Someone told me not to cry*

*But now that I'm older
My heart's colder
And I can see that it's a lie*

*Children, wake up
Hold your mistake up
Before they turn the summer into dust*

Hold up your mistakes before they turn the summer into dust. Repent and believe God now while the time is right. Your sin is not worth dying for. It's not worth giving your life for. It always looks better in the dark, but bring it out to the light. Love is calling you to do this. Not rules, but love. Your current loves are squeezing the life out of you, demanding more and more. They are not making you happy. They are putting you in bondage. Love calls you. Don't be surprised that this love hates your sin – your sin is ruining the relationship so of course love is against those things. Love and justice go together.

Give up your sin. It is not your master. Keep fighting the things that hurt your relationship. Recognize and name the other relationships you go to for life and give those up.

Here's how you can do it – oh wait, you can't exactly do it by yourself. That is the crazy thing about Christianity. It says that you cannot ever, ever, ever be good enough for God. God does have standards. He is holy, and he will judge. But you can't ever clean up your life in a way that will be seen as worthy, holy or right.

So repent and believe the gospel, the good news.

Here's what Hosea shows us about that good news, that gospel of grace for you instead of good works.

It's in chapter 3. Chapter three is what James Montgomery Boice says in his commentary is that greatest chapter in the Bible. That's pretty high praise for someone who knew his bible!

Remember I said that what gets us started about this is that it's all about a marriage. But as we saw, it's a bad marriage.³ Gomer is unfaithful to her husband. She plays a whore.

Here in chapter three, God tells Hosea to go back to her and redeem her. Think about what this must have meant.

Gomer had broken Hosea's heart. She had left him for other lovers, to be whore. She must have been a sex addict, and she couldn't get enough of the attention of men, the money, the low-level glamour. But things had somehow gone bad. Maybe she couldn't pay her debts and got sold into slavery. Maybe she had been pimped out and betrayed. Maybe she was now past her prime and she was being sold to ease the losses. All we know is she was being sold.

So here she stands in front of the bidding men. She would be stripped naked so they could see what they were buying. As Keller says, maybe she has her eyes closed, as the last measure of dignity she could muster. She's being sold as a slave, maybe as a sex slave.

The bidding starts. One shekel. Two. Five shekels. Ten. She hears a voice she recognizes – how can that be! It's Hosea her husband. He buys her for fifteen shekels and change, the average price of a slave.

Imagine what she is thinking – now he owns me. He's going to exact his revenge on me for all I've done. But he doesn't. He tells her that she must repent and return to him. That she must not be with any man for many days, not even him. He is going to enter into her brokenness and pain, her story, in order to restore her. And then, then he will be hers. I also will be with you. He won't her or make her his. He will be hers. I will be to you.

That is a beautiful story. That is the story of redemption. It's God radical to enter into extreme brokenness. It's a wake up call to our beautiful, mythical love stories where two perfect people get married and have perfect kids in a perfect house in a perfect neighborhood. They attend the perfect church. They take perfect vacations. They have no problems whatsoever. That wasn't the life Hosea was called to.

³ Thoughts from Keller follow intermixed in here. He has a great sermon on Hosea 3.

God called Hosea to show grace and love to Gomer in way she could not have fathomed. But he also showed it to Hosea. He showed Hosea that if he were to prophecy about grace, that he would have to enter into grace at a tremendous cost to himself. Hosea paid financially. He paid with his reputation, for surely he would have been considered a fool to buy back his whore wife. He would have paid relationally for sure. What wondrous love is this?

Jesus and his love – he marries sinners

Do you know love like this?

Here's what we're saying – Jesus' love for his people is like Hosea's love for Gomer. This is essential to understand in this book and in this text. If you start to think this gives us principles of marriage or ways of reconciliation, then you have missed the point. You have turned Hosea into a morality book. But it's not meant to be that. The book is to show us the love of God, the love of Christ.

This is so important, and Tim Keller has helped me see this so much. God is our king. He is our shepherd. He is our father. Those are essential components to understanding God and who he is. But there is something else, something different, something more perhaps uncomfortable.

In Isaiah 54 we read this: *For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name.* Whoa.

God frequently calls himself our husband. That is just crazy in how different it is than the way we normally think.

As Keller says, this marriage with God is supposed to take the *priority* in our lives. It is to be what we are to be about. It is and becomes who we are. You will suffer if you don't put your spouse in that esteemed place in your life.

You can't just stick God in your back pocket and pull him out now and then. You can't do that in your marriage. You can't just keep that on the side. Your marriage takes the priority of your life.

Your relationship with God is supposed to be filled with *intimacy*. God doesn't just want you to obey his rules and operate with him like he is the taskmaster. Or professor. Or guru. Or technical support. He is calling you to an intimacy that is that of a husband and a wife, where they know each other like no one else in the world knows. You cannot hide things from your spouse. She will know. God knows because he is intimate with you. As a lover. As a husband. He says in 2:14 that he wants to come to his bride and *allure* her, bring her into the wilderness and *speak tenderly* to her.

And there is a *potency*. Your marriage has power. It has the power to change you. If the whole world says you are an idiot, that you are unloveable and ugly – and that hurts! – but your spouse says you are smart, kind, wise, loved and beautiful, then you go out into the world in strength and confidence. But the reverse is also true. If the whole world says you are awesome but your spouse thinks you aren't, then you go out into the world in weakness. It has that type of power in your life to change the direction of who you are and what you're all about.

This is the relationship we are said to have with God – one of marriage. As we go along in Hosea, we don't only read judgment. We also read prophecies of hope and blessing. God says he will lead his people out in what sounds like a second exodus in chapter two. He says his people will finally call him "my God." He says he longs to redeem his people. He will gather them together. He will settle them in their homes. He will ransom them from the power of the grave and redeem them from death! He will heal. He will love. Those are awesome promises of God to his people in grace and hope.

He calls Not My People - My People! He calls No Mercy – Mercy! He gives them new names. He calls us Christian. It's a new identity based on his grace.

We know it's not because the people have deserved it. We know we have not deserved it.

Who are you in this story?

You are Gomer.

You have been unfaithful and so have I. We have walked away from the one who loved us. Maybe you've never been a Christian. You think there is no way there can be love like this. It's not true. There is an unending love. Stop sugar coating love and listen to the Bible's most realistic view of what love is – it involves justice and sacrifice. There must be payment in order to have love and to set things right.

Maybe you've wandered from God. You have left him. You have slept with other loves. You used to know God. You used to live in his house and love him. You remember what that was like. Maybe it was shallow. Maybe it was deep. But it's gone. You've been distracted. You've tried to live a double life, sometimes at your home, sometimes in the houses and beds of other lovers. What has been your distraction? Grades? Reputation? Working out? Having the coolest stuff? Being the best listener? Being competent? Sex? Drugs? Parties? It's something. We all fight idols. What has gained the priority, the intimacy and the potency in your life?

God calls us away from that. He sent Jesus to find us in our brokenness. We have gone down the paths of our lovers and it has or it will leave us stripped, naked and broken, sold as a slave. Many people think that is the life we are destined to live. They're resigned to it.

But there is a different way. There is a voice calling out to his bride. Jesus paid the price for his bride. He paid his reputation. He paid in the cost of his blood, the most precious commodity in the world. More precious than "unobtainium."

To continue the *Avatar* reference, Jesus looks at you and says, "I see you." He sees you in your sin. He knows. He has come to find you. Most of us think when he finds us he will spit on us and kick us out. But he actually buys us, and he doesn't exact his revenge.

He brings us to his house and loves us. That love may be startling to us. It will break us down in many ways because it involves living a different life. It will mean saying no to the lovers we long for and being only for Jesus. But it will set us free.

I long to see a campus set free. I long to live and walk with Jesus in this way. I am Gomer. So are you. May we hear the redeeming love and call of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who bought his bride with his blood.

As the Avett Brothers sing: *You can't be in love like the movies. Because in the movies, they're not in love at all.*

Don't believe the romantic comedy. Go ahead and laugh and enjoy them. But see the real story of the messy, costly redemption that Jesus purchases for us, his bride, and let's look forward to the day when the groom will stand there and take his bride fully to himself forever and all eternity. That's a much greater hope than wondering if Wall-E will get with Eve.

It's the hope of the gospel.