

Sunday School Lesson for May 31, 2020

Good morning, I hope you are well and blessed.

Lesson for May 31, 2020 "Return to Love and Justice" Scripture passage is from Hosea chapter 11 and 12.

Sources for this lesson: The Bible, The Bible Knowledge Commentary by John Walvoord and Roy Zuck, Halley's Bible Handbook, the King James version, Wiersbe's Expository Outlines of the Old Testament, Douglas Stuart, Word Biblical Commentary, Hosea-Jonah, David Guzik, pastor, Bible teacher, and author, Commentary on Hosea from The Pulpit Commentary, and The Present Word Adult Bible Lessons.

Hosea is one, of the minor prophets and an Old Testament prophet of the eighth century BC, called by God from the northern kingdom. He prophesied about the last forty years before the fall of the northern kingdom, warning the Israelites to return to God before it was too late. He was an older contemporary of Isaiah and Micah and began His ministry at a time when Israel was prosperous and powerful under King Jeroboam II (790–749 B.C.).

The book of Hosea illustrates a time when the people of Israel had been unfaithful to God through worship. They sought out relationships with Assyria and Egypt that were not approved by God, all in pursuit of military gain, and subjected themselves to improper worship of Baal. Throughout the story of Hosea, God has shown His commitment to the people of Israel, and yet they continue to both reject His love and disobey His commands. In many ways, today's passages show how God is lamenting the frustrations of a people who continued to defile the meaning of worship. In chapter 12, Jacob, who later was renamed Israel, practiced deceit and yet was the common ancestor of all the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob, diligent in his desire to seek God, wrestled with the angel to receive his blessings. Jacob's ancestors named in this text remained under the belief that their benefits would be a direct result of their success, without help from God. Jacob attempted to cleanse his home of idol worship (Genesis 35:2); however, his decedents remained steadfast in their worshiping of idols. As a result, dishonesty, as noted by Jacob's past, became the norm in how people attained their wealth.

Hosea is one of the more outrageous books of the Bible. That's because it sets up a parallel between Hosea's marriage to an adulterous wife and Israel's spiritual unfaithfulness to God in terms of worshiping idols. Hosea's

primary message was an indictment of the Jews in the northern kingdom for turning away from God during a period of relative safety and prosperity. Hosea ministered between 800 and 700 B.C. He primarily served the northern kingdom of Israel, which he referred to as Ephraim.

Israel finds herself facing a crisis brought on by their desire to protect themselves from the oncoming Assyrian invasion. They have gone to war with Judah, which has greatly weakened them so that they will not be able to withstand the upcoming war. Israel begins to utter words of repentance. They are the right words at the right time, but they are of little help because Israel has failed to live in faithfulness to the covenant.

God begins to wonder aloud what it is that he will do with Israel. It seems that God has tried every conceivable plan to help Israel be the people that he desires them to be, but to no avail. In chapter 11, we find that Israel continues to be condemned for their behavior. They are seeking help and protection from other foreign powers instead of truly seeking God's help. They have sown wickedness and will now reap injustice at the hands of the Assyrians. Israel will be destroyed and they will no longer be the nation they once were. Hosea, as he has done throughout the book, offers words of hope amidst the words of doom and judgment.

Hosea 11 can be split up into four individual segments. The first segment is comprised of verses 1-4 and deal with Israel's history with God. The second part, verses 5-7, depict Israel's present and immediate future. The third section, verses 8-9, speaks about God's present refusal to give up on Israel. Verses 10-11, speak of Israel's distant future. The final section does not depict a future that Hosea or his contemporaries will see, but gives hope for Israel's descendants. The voice speaking in all of chapter 11 is the voice of God.

From Stepping into the word – The scriptures teach that health and wealth are blessings from God, but that does not mean that the lack thereof is a sign of God's disapproval, nor that we are to strive after them. Hosea, the prophet reminds us that prosperity is not the standard by which we are to be judged. Hosea reminds us that love and justice are God's standard. We know, that we have a tendency to seek and put before God everything imaginable and all of them last but for a little while. Life is really short, and we should attend to the matter of making God first priority in our lives an urgent matter. Instead of running after wealth, we are called to apply Matthew 6:33, in our life. "But seek first his kingdom, and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

While most of Hosea has worked with the image of Israel as God's unfaithful wife, the image shifts to another common analogy for Israel's relationship with God: that of parent and child. God begins chapter 11 by relating how it is that God and Israel entered into the parent-child image. While the relationship between God and his chosen people begins back with Abraham, the part of the story that dominates this image is that of the Exodus. God saw an abused and mistreated child in slavery in Egypt. In the call of Moses, we get these words from God in Exodus 4:22-23, "Israel is my firstborn son...Let my son go." The image here is of adoption. Israel is not God's child in a biological sense, nor is Israel an heir so that anything is owed to him. Rather, God has adopted Israel out of love and compassion.

This adoption is rooted in God's initiative and love. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, out of Egypt I called my son." God's love moves him to rescue Israel from the oppression of Egypt and it is in that redeeming act that Israel becomes God's child. Israel has a choice to enter into a covenant with God. Israel responds positively, for a while. The more God called her, the more she went away. Israel's rebellion is shown in two ways. First, she refuses to continue to respond to God's call. Israel rejects her status as a child and refuses to accept the guidance and direction that God as parent offers. Second, Israel refuses her status as children of God by chasing after and worshipping other Baals. While God had been faithful, Israel failed to live as she should have.

Despite Israel's rejection of God as parent, it was God who taught Israel to walk. When Israel fell down it was God who bent down and picked them up, bandaging their wounds and setting them on the path again. Israel refused to recognize or realize that it was God who offered so much care for them. The parenting image is extended as God states that he acted toward them as a loving parent who bends down and picks a small child up and offers the warm cheek to cheek embrace that all parents long to lavish on their children. It's an image of safety, love, and affection with which parents will easily identify. This rich imagery offers us a glimpse into the heart of God toward his children.

Throughout Israel's formative years, it was God who provided for them in loving and steadfast ways. God repeatedly offered to restore the nation if it would only turn to him. By stubbornly refusing God's invitation, the northern kingdom has sealed its doom. Even so, Israel as a nation was not finished. A remnant of faithful Israelites would return to Jerusalem, where one day the Messiah would come, offering pardon and reconciliation to all who would faithfully follow him.

The northern kingdom survived for only two centuries after its break with Jerusalem, its spiritual and political leaders did not help the people learn the way to God, so as a nation they would never repent. Hosea prophesied its downfall, which happened when Shalmaneser of Assyria conquered Israel in 722 B.C.

Verse six depicts the nature of the coming invasion. Assyria will invade and completely overcome all of Israel's fortifications. The sword is specifically mentioned to consume Israel's oracle-priests. These priests had a hand in continuing to lead Israel in her worship of Baal, but also led Israel's leadership in confirming her misplaced trust in other foreign powers who promised to help protect her from Assyria. Their real crime is that they failed to lead Israel to trust that God would be the one to protect and provide for them.

In verses 8 and 9 moving from outlining Israel's failures as a child to God's unrelenting concern for the children he loves. The section is set off by a series of questions wondering how in the world God can abandon Israel. For Israel, the punishment for a rebellious child was death (Deuteronomy 21:18-21). If the imagery that God has been using in chapter 11 holds true, Israel's punishment will look a lot like death. Yet, Israel's complete destruction is not what God desires. God wonders out loud how he could bring Israel to utter ruin.

The cities of Admah and Zeboiim were cities that were near Sodom and Gomorrah and were destroyed alongside those cities. Once again, the covenant curses of Deuteronomy 29:32 offer these cities as examples for what will happen to Israel if she is unfaithful. This called for punishment for Israel's rebellion will only leave behind rubble and waste.

God's wondering leads him to announce that he will not execute the prescribed punishment on Israel. In Hebrew, the heart is the center of the will and of understanding. God's understanding of the situation and his divine will remain true to his eternal nature of compassion and mercy and so he will not completely destroy Israel. God's wrath and sense of justice are perfectly balanced by his compassion and love. Israel must pay some of the price for the unfaithfulness, but she will not receive the full sentence.

Verse nine provides more insight into the nature of God. God will not execute his anger because he is not like you and I. God is the Holy One who has the freedom to act in compassion and mercy.

A time is coming, declares God, when Israel will come to her senses and begin to return to the Lord. That day will come when God roars like a lion

and his children respond. They will come trembling back to him in repentance and contrition. They will return to God and he will return them to their land. As we said at the outset, this image is not one of Israel's immediate future, but of a day that Hosea and his hearers will not see. The hope, strengthened by the previous section, longs for a day when Israel will once again be called God's children and they will respond with the same faithfulness that God has displayed toward them.

There are many parallels to this passage in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. Jesus' story about a son who squanders all of his father's love and wealth captures the essence of God's desire for us. Even though we wander off, even though we do unspeakable damage to the ones God loves, God is watching for us, hoping that someday we might return. This was God's plan for Israel in Hosea, and this is God's plan for us today when we wander off.

It would be difficult to read this passage in Hosea and not identify with it on some level. Regardless of with whom you identify in this passage the truth of God's nature is clear. Even though God must allow us to walk away from him and experience the consequences of our own sins and infidelities, our destruction and punishment is not God's desire for us. God's desire for us is to always return so that we might be embraced by his love and compassion and begin to walk again in newness of life.

In chapter 12 the two principles that Hosea called the nation to live by, love and justice, are the very foundation of God's character. They are essential to his followers. Justice without love, because it has no heart, drives people away from God. In Israel, dishonesty had become an accepted means of obtaining wealth. Israelites who were financially successful could not imagine that God would consider them sinful. They thought that their wealth was a sign of God's approval, and they didn't bother to consider how they had gotten it. We need to remember that God's measure of success is different from ours. He calls us to faithfulness, not to affluence. Character is more important to God than our money.

The Jewish people were living for vanity, "the wind" and receiving no nourishment. Israel was committing two sins. (1) They were worshiping idols which are nothing, even less than nothing, and turning from the true God to live on empty substitutes. They were feeding on the wind. (2) They were depending for protection on treaties with Egypt and Assyria instead of trusting their great God. This too was emptiness and chasing after the wind, and God had to discipline Israel to bring them back to Himself and His Word.

Abraham is the father of the Jewish nation (Matthew 3:9), but it was Jacob who built the twelve tribes of Israel (Genesis 46:8-27). Hosea used the name “Jacob” for the nation because Jacob is an illustration of God’s loving discipline. Hosea cited several key events in Jacob’s life. During much of his life, Jacob struggled with himself, with others, and with the Lord, and until he surrendered to God at Jabbok, he never really walked by faith. God had to discipline him to bring him to that place of surrender.

Hosea names some of the sins that the people had committed. He begins with dishonesty in business (Hosea 12:7), defrauding people so as to make more money. Their prosperity led to pride (Hosea 12:8), the kind of self-sufficiency that says, “We don’t need God.” The Lord warned that He would humble them. Instead of enjoying their houses, they would live in tents as they did during their wilderness journeys. When the Assyrians were through with Israel, the Jews would be grateful even for the booths they lived in for a week during the Feast of Tabernacles.

The prophets God sent had warned the people, but the people wouldn’t listen (Hosea 12:10). They turned from the Word of the living God and practiced idolatry (Hosea 12:11-14). This provoked God to anger, and the way they shed innocent blood provoked Him even more.

From Stepping into the world – Hosea’s God relates to the world through justice, righteousness, steadfast love, and mercy. Hosea’s prophecy is relevant to current discipleship concerns, particularly in Western society, where many people strive after material wealth, success, and productivity, taking part in Baalism by another name. Hosea’s favorite term for those who ignore God and pursue Baal is “harlotry.” Israel “plays the harlot” with Baal, much as today we “play the harlot” with materialistic, success-driven society.

For centuries, many Christians have put their pursuit of God’s kingdom ahead of pursuit of wealth by taking vows of poverty. Even if we are not moved to take vows of poverty as we strive for God’s kingdom, we can all work to uphold God’s standards by showing selfless love and by working for justice, especially for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

The verbal parallels between Hosea 12:8 and Revelation 3:17 indicate that the danger of self-delusion that can accompany prosperity revealed itself in the first century C.E. as it the eight century B.C.E.

Hosea 12:8 says, “Ephraim boasts; I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin.”

Revelation 3:17 says, "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing. You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

Hosea chapter 11 and 12, teaches us that we often spurn God's gracious attempts to deliver us from bondage of sin, though we deserves complete destruction, God continues to pursue us in steadfast love.

A message of this lesson is found in verse 6: "But you must return to your God; maintain love and justice, and wait for your God always." As we look at Israel, we see something of our own reflection in the mirror. God calls us to repent of our sins, do away with injustice and idolatry and follow Him only.

There was a Sunday school lesson on the word "repentance." "What does repentance mean?" The teachers asked. "Being sorry for your sins," was the answer. Not bad, but better still was, "Being sorry enough to quit." "You must return to your God..." Hosea said.

Hosea 12:14 says, "But Ephraim has bitterly provoked him to anger; his Lord will leave upon him the guilt of his bloodshed and will repay him for his contempt."

Consider, when we provoke God's anger with our sins, we can't blame anyone but ourselves when we are punished.

Closing: For the love that casts out fear, the faith that sustains and the hope that never perishes, be with us now and forever more. Amen. God watch over us and take care of us.

Next week's lesson June 7, 2020 "The Call of Wisdom" from Proverbs 1.

Summer quarter Sunday school books are available, in the church office. If you are unable to get by the church office and pick up a book, let me know and I will place one in the mail for you. Summer quarter lessons start next Sunday June 7, 2020.