

LOVE'S LASTING LOYALTY

HOSEA 6:4-6

Benedict Arnold. The name has come to be synonymous in American history with betrayal. To be sure, there were others who lived in the American colonies who were sympathetic to the British cause, but Benedict Arnold was different because he was a colonial general, a leader in the revolution, and a war hero. And then came the betrayal. It was discovered that he had planned to sell out his own American forces for money. He escaped, but his good name has not escaped and we think of him as traitor and betrayer.

You see, the closer you are supposed to be to a cause, to a belief, to an organization, to a person, the more hurtful are the effects of betrayal. There is a corollary between the proximity of the relationship and the pain brought about by its betrayal. It is because betrayal is greater when there is an expectancy of loyalty.

That is why betrayal in a marriage is so devastating. There is meant to be no closer bond than the ties of marriage. Two who were separate individuals now become one flesh. They pledge bonds of loyalty “till death us do part.”

When that kind of betrayal comes, it cuts deep and can smash a world apart. The feelings that are generated are overwhelming: shock, misery, numbness, helplessness, despair.

As we come to the book of Hosea, we come to the story of a man who was facing that sort of betrayal. It was not the husband who had been disloyal. It was his wife. Hosea had been told by God to go and to marry a woman of the streets; a woman of immoral character. He did what he was told. He married a woman who was known for her immorality. And in the course of time, that reputation proved to be deserved as she betrayed his trust and left him. As we look at the situation, we almost want to say, “Hosea, what did you expect?”

But as we look at the story a bit more closely, we can begin to see ourselves in the story of Hosea and Gomer. And no, we are not in the role of Hosea. We are in the role of the unfaithful wife.

Hosea was to be a living parable, portraying the relationship between the Lord and His own unfaithful people. Hosea was playing the part of God. His unfaithful wife was acting in the same manner we act when we are unfaithful. What Hosea says to Gomer is what the Lord said to Israel in that day and what God says to us today when we are disloyal to Him.

*4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
For your loyalty is like a morning cloud,
And like the dew which goes away early.
5 Therefore I have hewn them in pieces by the prophets;
I have slain them by the words of My mouth;
And the judgments on you are like the light that goes forth.
6 For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:4-6).*

You can hear the pathos in these words. They are filled with pathos and pain. There is almost an exasperated tone that is taken as the Lord communicates to His people. We don't normally think of the God of the universe expressing emotion, but the Scriptures tell us that our sins grieve God's Spirit. It is out of that grief that the Lord relates His desire for His people. What does God want? The answer is given in these verses:

1. GOD WANTS LOYALTY: *For I delight in loyalty (6:6).*

What is involved in this quality we call loyalty? It involves the taking of sides. It means that I align myself with the one to whom I am loyal; that I resolve to look out for that person's welfare and to do that which will result in that person's good.

What sort of loyalty is in view here? It is the loyalty of love. How do I know that? It is because of the particular Hebrew word that is used here to describe this loyalty. It is the Hebrew word **חֶסֶד** -- it is normally translated "lovingkindness." But it can alternately be translated as...

Love
Joy
Peace
Patience
Kindness
Faithfulness
Gentleness

We've just finished a study of the fruit of the Spirit here at St Andrews, but **חֶסֶד** summarizes all of the aspects of that fruit.

Why did the translators render this term "loyalty?" Perhaps it is because they recognized something about this quality of love. Perhaps they recognized that there is a link between loyalty and love.

There is, you know. You will always be loyal to that which you really love. Real love will capture your heart and your loyalty.

There is a scene in the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* where Sam relates both the instructions that had been given to him to follow Frodo and his own resolve to carry it out, “Don't you leave him Samwise Gamgee, and I don't mean to!” It pictures one who has committed to following his master, no matter where that might take him. Even into Mordor itself. Even into those dark places.

We look at the picture of such loyalty and it fills us with a longing. I believe there is in each one of us a longing to express and to demonstrate that kind of loyalty. We were made for that. We hunger to hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

We were made to want to please our Creator. Every person here longs for a fulfillment and a meaning to life. God delights in loyalty and, whether we realize it or not, we long to be that delight.

Unfortunately, there is a world of difference between longing and doing. As Paul says in Romans 7:19, *the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish*. As one fellow said, “I can be good, but I can't be good enough for long enough.” That brings us to our next point.

2. GOD WANTS LASTING LOYALTY.

*4 What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
What shall I do with you, O Judah?
For your loyalty is like a morning cloud,
And like the dew which goes away early. (Hosea 6:4).*

Dew is a morning phenomenon. That is true here in Florida and it is even more true in the dry climate of Canaan. Paula and I and John McCall had opportunity to experience that first hand last month. When they speak of the dry season in that land, they mean it with all seriousness. You might see a cloud in the morning, but it quickly vanishes in the heat of the day. There might have been the dew on the grass at first light of dawn, but it quickly evaporates.

The Lord describes the loyalty and the love of Ephraim and of Judah in those sorts of evaporating terms. Hosea writes these words in the days of the divided kingdom.

Ephraim was shorthand for the ten northern tribes. They were the tribes that had broken away to do their own thing. They not only became their

own kingdom, they also established their own places of worship at Bethel and at Dan.

Judah was in the south and represented the southern kingdom. It was the location of the city of Jerusalem and the temple and the right worship, but their loyalty is not described as being any better than that of the northern kingdom.

It did not matter if you were in the north or in the south, the problem was the same. It was in the perseverance of their love.

There is a correlation between the reality of your love and the endurance of your love.

- Real love lasts. That is one of the ways you can tell whether it is real. It passes the test of time.

When we see those first romantic attachments experienced by our kids, we refer to it as “puppy love.” I don’t know if that is a very good term, because it is real to the puppy. What makes it puppy love is that it does not last.

That is because real love is not merely an emotion that you experience. Real love involves a commitment and a binding of yourself to that one whom you love.

- Divorce today.

I think the overwhelming problem with marriages today is that there has not been a determination to love with loyalty. People talk about “falling out of love” as though love were a tipsy canoe that dumps you into some cold water. The truth is that love is a decision. How do I know that? Because you are COMMANDED to love.

- Husbands, you are commanded to love your wives (Ephesians 5:25).
- Wives are instructed to love their husbands (Titus 2:4).
- Believers are told to love one another (John 15:12), to love your neighbor as yourself (Galatians 5:14), and even to love your enemies (Matthew 5:44).

How do you do that? How do you love the unlovely? You do it by recognizing that YOU are unlovely and that you have been loved with a supernatural love despite your unloveliness.

Steve Brown likes to say that you can't love until you've been loved and then you can only love to the extent you have been loved. I'm still pondering whether that is true, but what IS true is that you have been loved with an infinite love and that you are therefore called to reflect that love toward others.

- Fickleness is a mark of immaturity. God calls you to grow up and to love with an adult love.

3. GOD WANTS LOYALTY MORE THAN RELIGION.

*For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice,
And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6).*

This is not to say that sacrifice or burnt offerings were unimportant. Those sacrifices of the Old Testament were established by God as a picture of what Jesus would accomplish upon the cross as the ultimate sacrifice. There is an old saying that goes: "A picture is worth a thousand words." The sacrifices and the offerings and the tabernacle and the temple and the priests were all living pictures of what Christ would accomplish upon the cross.

God was not calling for an end to that sacrificial system in Hosea's day, though this perhaps is a hint that the sacrificial system would eventually come to an end.

Neither is Hosea saying that we ought to dispense with the outward elements of religion. It IS to say that religion without the reality of a loving loyalty is worthless.

Let me get more specific. There is no value of coming to church on Sunday morning if your life is not different on Monday morning. Indeed, if your religion is confined to rituals without reality, then it is worse than the absence of religion because it is inoculating you against the real thing.

You know about inoculations. That is when you go to the doctor and he gives you a shot. That shot contains a very small amount of the disease that you are trying to avoid and it allows your body to react against that disease and to build up an immunity. That way, when you are faced with the real disease, it will not affect you.

Religion without reality has a tendency to inoculate you against the real thing. It gives you just enough to let you think that you are doing something to impress God, but in reality, it is only deadening your soul to a real relationship with God.

God wants loyalty more than religion.
He wants reality more than ritual.

Here is the point. There is a correlation between the reality of your love and the value of the expressions of your love.

4. GOD DEMONSTRATED HIS LOYALTY AT THE CROSS.

But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me. (Hosea 6:7).

This reference to Adam takes us back to the Garden of Eden. It reminds us of the first sin. But it also reminds us that there was once a covenant relationship with Adam.

When you spoke about a covenant in the Old Testament times, you were speaking about something that involved life and death. Entering into a covenant was tantamount to binding your life to your promise. Keep the covenant and live; break the covenant and die. Breaking a covenant was not like getting a traffic ticket. Rather, it was taking to yourself and embracing a sentence of death. That was the very nature of a covenant.

But Adam transgressed the covenant. And he wasn't the only one. Hosea says that we have also transgressed the covenant. We have acted in a way that was treacherous. We have set ourselves against God. Adam brought sin into the world and we have continued that same path of sin and rebellion and covenant-breaking.

That is why Christ came. He is the covenant-keeper. There is an organization out there called "Promise-Keepers" and it is a good organization and it is doing some good things, but Jesus is the only True Promise Keeper. He came and He lived the life we should have lived and then He died the death we deserved to die.

Adam was made to love God and to be loved by God.
And so were you.

That is why God brought about a new covenant. This new covenant was not written on tablets of stone, but in the hearts of men and sealed in the blood of His Son.

From where do you get...

- Loyalty?
- Lasting loyalty?
- Loyalty that transcends ritual to the place of relationship?

- Loyalty that goes beyond religious platitudes to the place where we live and breathe?

You get it by going to the cross. You get it by looking at the One who loved you to the point of death and beyond. You look at the One who loved you with an everlasting loyalty. You look at the One who was not content with ritual sacrifices, but who sacrificed Himself for you.

There is a correlation between the reality of your love and the extent to which you have been loved.

You will never love to the degree you can love until you see the infinite degree with which you have been loved.

You will never forgive to the degree you can forgive until you see the infinite degree with which you have been forgiven.

You will never give to the degree you can give until you see the infinite gift that you have been given.

When I tell Paula that I love her—and I tell her that a lot because wives need to hear that they are loved—she sometimes retorts, “But I love you more.” I used to dispute that, but I don’t anymore. It may be that she has a greater capacity for love than I do. I don’t know how to measure such things. But instead, I typically reply, “But I loved you first.”

I did, and we both know it. We met in college and within a couple of weeks I decided that I loved her and that I was going to marry her and live with her for the rest of my life. I didn’t tell her that at the time; it would have scared her away. But over time, I wooed her and told her of my love and I won her heart.

The Lord has done the same thing with us. He loved us before we ever loved Him. He loved us before the foundation of the world. Before the hills were new and before the stars were young, He called us by name and determined that He would make us His beloved bride. And yes, He loves us a lot more than we can ever love Him.

As we learn of the greatness of His infinite love, it will do something within us. We will begin to respond with a reciprocating echo of that wondrous love.

This week Paula and I will be celebrating our wedding anniversary. It was 34 years ago that we entered into a covenant together, exchanging vows to love, honor, and cherish one another as long as we both shall live.

Can I tell you something about our marriage? We still like to date. We still like to go out to eat together and it isn’t about the food. It is about sitting at a table together for a time

of quiet intimacy; an intimacy where we share of ourselves with one another.

As deep and as lasting as has been that love, it is only a pale reflection of that to which you are invited today. You are invited to a meal. It is a love feast. The Lord is the host who invites you to the meal and He is also the meal itself.

He does not invite you because you have been loyal; you haven't.

He does not invite you because of your religious efforts; indeed, depending upon your religious efforts will disqualify you from your place here.

He invites you to this table out of His mercy and grace.

Mercy is that quality where you do not receive the punishment you deserve.

Grace is that quality where you are given the blessing you do not deserve.

You've heard me illustrate it before with the police officer who stops you because you have been exceeding the speed limit.

- He doesn't give you a ticket: That is mercy.
- He invites you to his home for a meal: That is grace.

This is a table of both mercy and grace. It pictures the punishment that you deserved that was carried out in Christ. His body was broken; His blood was shed. He was judged in your place and took upon Himself your sin and your wrong-doing. It also pictures that which you are given as a believer: You partake in the closest possible manner the body and blood of Jesus Christ. You are identified with Him.

- Because He died, you are said to have died with Him.
- Because He was buried, you are said to have been buried.
- Because He rose from the dead, you have a new life in Christ and a promise of your own eventual resurrection.
- Because He is the eternal One, you have eternal life.
- Because He is righteous, you have been declared to be righteous.

At the same time, there is both a "now" and "not yet" aspect to that relationship. The Bible speaks of how we partake of this meal "until He comes." There is coming a day when, instead of sitting at a table with bread and wine, we shall sit at a table with the risen Jesus. There is coming a day when, instead of communing with Jesus in Spirit, we shall see Him face to face. We are betrothed to Him now, but there is coming a day when we shall experience the final consummation of the marriage.

That means this table looks back to the cross as well as future to that day when He shall return. Jesus is not physically here in these elements. But He is here in Spirit. And we partake of Him by faith, eating of that which was broken on our behalf and drinking of that which was poured out for our sins.