

Anyone ever stand in line with a grocery cart and read all those tabloids about the messed up lives of celebrities? Words plastered across the front of magazines like... “Surprise, I’m Cheating.” ...“Give Back My Lover — “Shocking Confessions! — So and so broke up with her fiancé because she wanted to date his sister!” “Baby Come Back To Me — Becky dumped her husband for his best friend, Josh!! Now she’s secretly seeing her husband again!” On and on.

Stupid inane stuff. Right? Go home and read the Bible instead! Except if you read Hosea, that Bible story is just about as bad as the tabloids. You could actually put it on a tabloid. It would read “**I married a Prostitute!**” The byline would go something like this: “*Clergyman’s wife cheats on him. His children belong to three other men. After selling herself to everyone in town, Gomer ends up as a slave. Her husband, Hosea, eventually buys her back for \$12.50. He claims that he knew she would be unfaithful to him in the beginning, but God told him to marry her. God also told him to buy her out of slavery and love her again.*”

The book of Hosea is perhaps the most shocking book in the Old Testament. Few people can imagine what it would be like to be married to a woman like

Gomer. She had no inner moral compass — no restraints. You could never trust her. You would know that she was always looking for some excitement. You would see her invite the attentions of other men and then deny it vehemently. The ability to make a commitment would never be a part of her character. She would disappear for days at a time and you would not know where she was. She would cruelly mock you and you would be the laughingstock of the town.

Why did Hosea marry someone like Gomer?

God asked him to marry her; and he willingly did so

Sometimes instead of using words to communicate to his people God would give the prophet a message to act out. Sort of like doing a skit with your life. The prophet's actions would be a living drama communicating God's message, rather than just saying it. It was a more vivid depiction than simply words.

What did the message mean? It was an ongoing drama of God's marriage to unfaithful Israel. As people saw Gomer, a woman with no moral sense, they remembered that she was the prophet's wife and he had married her *knowing* that she would be unfaithful. They would ultimately get the message that there was a parallel between Hosea's

relationship to Gomer and God's relationship to them. The shocking thing about this book, even more shocking than the commandment of God for Hosea to marry a prostitute, is this scripture right here.

“Go show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another and is an adulteress. Love her as the Lord loves the Israelites though they turn to other gods and love sacred raisin cakes.” Hosea 3:1

Go show your love to your wife again Hosea. Go buy her back – take her out of prostitution and bring her home again. What kind of God is this? How do we understand this kind of Divine Love?

In Hosea, God is in anguish over His people. Hosea was written in the last days of Israel, around 700 BC over the reigns of the last six kings. Four of these six were assassinated, and the nation itself was slipping deeper and deeper into idolatry and moral bankruptcy. God was full of wrath, and understandably so. He openly acknowledged, through the prophets, that He would destroy Israel. But this judgment grieved him. “How can I give you up, O Ephraim?”, he cries out in anguish. Even after His people had turned their backs on Him, God's lament for his people is profound...He is jealous for them. He doesn't

want them to go to another lover, be swooned away by other desires other than him. It is a lovers cry of anguish that declares in Hosea...

How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender”. -Hosea 11:3-8

Really? Even after prostitution God says this?

We don't always associate this kind of unrestrained, unconditional love for people with the God of the Old Testament. Sometimes we think of the God of the OT as wrathful and punitive... but here it is. ..the true heart revealed. A compassionate, warm and tender God who tells Hosea go love your wife again, even though she has defiled herself. I will do the same for Israel God says. I will not destroy them. I will love them again.

You know what? A lot of people have this book called the Bible completely wrong. We're in a series on marriage by Tim Keller and there is a lot in it that can help strengthen your marriage. I invite you to come to the Adult Ed class after this and hear some great words from Mike Clark on this. And because we're in this series some of you have

shared with me some really great love stories about how you and your spouse met, or have gone through life together. But do you know what? This book right here is the greatest love story ever written. It is a romantic love story full of passion and the desire of God to be with his people.

Did you ever think of the Bible that way? As the story of a romance between God and humanity?

So many people think the Bible is a bunch of rules..

Soren Kierkegaard, saw it a different way. He was a Danish theologian and he said that the Bible was much more than a bunch of rules for getting through life – should and “should not” – for living. Rather, he said, **the Bible is a book of 66 love letters that God has written for the world.** And I am convinced that unless you believe *that*, unless you see the Bible as Gods love letter to you, you aren’t going to pick up the Bible and read it. Why would you want to?

Who daily picks up the owners guide to their flat screen TV, or dishwasher, and pours with joy over the instructions on how to use it, or how to set it up? *Who does that?*

Oh YAY! Once again today I get to read all the rules for operation! I can’t wait! I am so excited!

Don't get me wrong. It's great to know how to operate the TV of course when you have three remotes and you can't figure out how to turn on the news...(I was in that state just the other day – there's a place for rules and they are in scripture) but normal people don't look forward to reading *the rules for operation because they just can't get enough of it..because they are passionate about it*. You don't develop a desire to read an instruction guide the way you develop a desire to read a love letter from a spouse or a friend. It's a completely different thing!

I knew a woman who kept the love letters her husband had sent her when he was in the war in a special trunk, and even though he had long since returned home, she would take them out and read them from time to time. "I look forward to reading these letters" she would say. "They put into words the feelings that we still have for one another."

The Bible, puts into words the deep love and compassion that God has for you, and his desire beyond all else to have a relationship with you that matters – that counts. And if you read the Bible as a love letter you are going to want to read it again,,and again...and again. Its going to

become your favorite book. A list of rules? That's never been what God has been about. Its always been about a love relationship. Even when that love relationship is with faithless prostitute people like we find in the book of Hosea...Until you grasp the "love of God that surpasses knowledge...until you get that you are loved passionately by your Creator, and see the Bible as the description of that,, you have missed the crux of what Christianity is all about. Its not a religion, a list of do's and don't's...it's a relationship.

(IMAGES OF WEDDING THROUGHOUT)

Francis Chan tells about a wedding that he did that involved a woman in her 50's who had been through a lot of trials in her life. She was a believer, loved the Lord, and always lived with joy despite the difficulties she experienced. Her name was Jean and she had a daughter named April who was 28 years old, but who developmentally had the mind of a six year old. And when you have a daughter like that, not everyone wants to marry you, and take a child like that on...and Jean was older and didn't expect to every get married again.

Then along comes this guy Rick, who just totally falls head over heels in love with Jean, and during the pre-marital counseling Jean was just

beside herself and occasionally would ask Rick, "Are you sure you want me? I am old. Look at these wrinkles." And he would say "I love you. Those are dimples. You are beautiful." And Jean would say again, "Are you sure you want me? I mean I have this daughter...". "I love you and I love your daughter." Rick would say. "You are wonderful and I want to be with you". Jean couldn't believe it but she was ecstatic. And then the wedding day came.

And Francis is doing the wedding ceremony. Jean and Rick are up front doing their vows, and Rick puts the ring on Jean's finger and promises to love and care for her as long as they both shall live... And after that's done, Francis announces that Rick also has a ring for April, who was a bridesmaid that day standing up front, because Rick wants April to know that he is adopting her as his child, and will always be there for her to care for her and watch over her.

Well, when April hears this she is so beside herself...remember she is 28 with a six year old brain...she cries out "Rick I love you! I love you!"

And then she runs up the steps of the chancel and cries out again "I love you! I love you! I love you" and throws her arms around Ricks neck.

And Francis said he never had cried in a wedding before but he stood

there and broke down, and everyone else in the audience was crying too, and finally Francis just stopped all the formality of the whole ceremony and held up the Bible.

And he said, "Do you realize what just happened here today?"

I don't think you will ever see a more clear picture of what this book – the Bible - is all about, than what you just saw here. What happened up here today is the best representation of this book that you will ever have. The Bible says that God wants to take us as his bride. This is Biblical language for the great love and closeness God wants to have with us. He wants us as his bride...we are the bride of Christ. And just like Jean couldn't believe that Rick would truly want her, so we can also say, *"God do you really want me? Do you really love me that much? Can it be possible that despite all the wrong things I have done in my life, the stupid mistakes I have made, the secret sins I have committed, you still want me and love me? Despite all the times I've wandered from you and been unfaithful? Sought other things first, been distrustful and denied you?"* And God says, "How can I give you up? You are mine, and I created you to be loved by me. I want to be with you. Yes, of course I will take you back. I want you so much, I died for this."

But not only that. God also says in addition to being his bride, we are his children – it says in scripture that he is a father to the fatherless, and that he adopts us...and sometimes we come to church and we might have the wrong attitude...something like, “*Hey God...I hope you see this. What I am doing for you here. I am showing up for you God on Sundays. Give me some credit. Answer a prayer or two.*”

When really like April our attitude should be, “Are you kidding me God? You have adopted *me* as *your own*. I’m awestruck that you would want me. O God of the universe – that you would die for me?! Give your life for me? I love you! I love you! I love you! I am overwhelmed...I’m your bride? I’m your child? Your adopting *me*? You want to be with *me*?” We should approach church every time we come here in awe. “Lord, you want to take me in?”

The Creator of all that is says “I want to put a ring on your finger and tell you that I am covenanted to you...for better or worse I will be there for you. Jesus says, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

And do you know what God’s greatest command is for us? God’s greatest command is “Love Me”. Not “Do this...do that”. “Try harder”. God’s greatest command is “Love Me” ...with all of your heart, with all of

your soul, with all of your strength, with all of your mind. Just “Love Me” and if you do, all the other things will be taken care of. If you love me with all that you are, my love will fill you and you will be able to love others like you’ve never been able to love others before.

You will be able to forgive in ways you never thought possible.

You will be able to serve in ways that are completely selfless and holy.

Just love me first God says ...and watch the fruit come forth.

Friends, The good news of the gospel encapsulated in six words is this;

God is in pursuit of you today, (even if you’ve been a Christian your whole life) God is in pursuit of you today to draw you closer to him, and to show you how much he loves you with an unprecedented unconditional forgiving love that is only found in the God of the Bible – the God of Jesus Christ. God is in relentless pursuit of you and will not give up...he is jealous for your heart....you are of more value than you know and our Divine God yearns after you and seeks to love you, and seeks your love in return – no matter what your past, no matter what your burden, if you are doubting, or guilty or just plain worn out. God says this at the end of Hosea – after he takes prostitute Israel back to himself he declares with extravagant love...

I will heal their waywardness.

I will love them lavishly. ...

I will make a fresh start with Israel.

He'll burst into bloom like a crocus in the spring.

He'll put down deep oak tree roots,

he'll become a forest of oaks!

He'll become splendid—like a giant sequoia,

**From now on I'm the one who answers and satisfies.... Everything you
need is to be found in me." Hosea 14**

Let Us Pray...