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Priority One: Mercy, Not Sacrifice Hosea 6:1-6

Last summer the session of our church adopted an important policy called an Ends Policy. In our form of church governance the session seeks the will of Christ for the church. The Ends policy reflects the hard work of the session in defining the kind of church that we believe God is calling us to be. In general, the policy says that by God's grace we want to be a community of worship, a community of discipleship, and a community of mission to others.

Right now as the leadership team is setting plans for 2012 and beyond we're using this Ends policy as a target to aim at. We're asking questions like, how can we become more of a community of worship? How can we be a congregation that is really working together to grow in our discipleship of Jesus Christ? How can we engage more and more people into the mission that God has called us to in Christ?

As we've been engaging that work, one of the things that has been stirring in me to talk about together as a congregation is what it means to be a community of worship. I hope the video we watched during the offering got your brains stirring about it a bit, but I actually want you to take 2 minutes and turn to one or two other people around you (be brave). Share with each other, what you think it means to be a community of worship. Ready? Go. (give the congregation a few minutes to discuss – **What do you think it means to be a community of worship?**).

Did you come up with some good ideas? Does it mean that we make everyone happy with our worship style? Does it mean that have great sermons? Does it mean that we have an awesome choir and worship band? Does it have any relevance to what you do when you are in this room on Sunday morning? Does it have anything to do with the way you act outside of Sunday morning? Let's see what the scripture says.

This morning we're going to look at one of the minor prophets in the Bible. His name was Hosea. Hosea is one of the most intriguing of all the prophets in the Bible because of what God asked him to do. God asked Hosea to marry an adulterous wife named Gomer to help Hosea and all who would read his prophecies to know how God loves an adulterous people. With that framework in mind, I want you to listen carefully to God's Word this morning. What does it teach us about

being a community of worship? If we don't get it, we'll miss one of the most important messages in the Bible about worship.

Read **Hosea 6:1-6** & pray Prayer of Illumination

Hosea is known for showing both God's judgment and God's love. We see them both here don't we? We see God's judgment – **"He has torn us to pieces ... He has injured us ... What can I do with you, Ephraim? What can I do with you, Judah? Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears. Therefore I cut you in pieces with my prophets, I killed you with the words of my mouth; my judgments flashed like lightning upon you."** Does that sound like God's judgment? Yes. But why so harsh – why such vivid and painful language? It's because God does NOT put up with idolatry! And idolatry was a serious epidemic during Hosea's time. King after king for Israel and Judah is listed in the Bible as doing evil in the eyes of the Lord. They were worshipping other gods; they were reaping injustice on the people of God; they were seeking salvation in allegiances with other kingdoms. And they were still carrying on in the worship of God. They were covering their bases; they were making sure that all the gods were happy. But the Lord, the one true God wasn't pleased with their worship – with their idolatry. God doesn't tolerate idolatry, so his judgment in Hosea and many of the other prophets is harsh.

But we also see God's love and God's grace in this passage. **"He will heal us ... He will bind up our wounds ... he will revive us ... he will restore us, that we may live in his presence. ... As surely as the sun rises, he will appear; he will come to us like the winter rains, like the spring rains that water the earth."** God's grace is so evident in this passage, right next to God's judgment.

So, does God have a split personality? No, both God's judgment and grace exist because of God's covenantal love. If you've been around for the last handful of years, you probably know that one of my favorite Hebrew words is **chesed**. Can you say it (*chesed*)? *Chesed* when it is associated with God in the Bible refers to God's everlasting, covenantal love or loving kindness or mercy. It is often used to describe God's attitude and action toward humanity as a result of the loving covenant He's made with us. Thus, both his judgment and grace exist because of God's *chesed* for His people.

God loves you. Because He loves you God sometimes has to discipline you or train you to live God's way – which is the best way to live. Sometimes that means you're going to get torn to pieces and sometimes it means that you're going to get injured, but through that discipline you will be revived, restored and renewed. You'll be healed of your idolatry.

Chesed is also used to describe the way the people of God are to live. Remember Micah 6:8? **Micah 6:8 "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy (*chesed*) and**

to walk humbly with your God.” It is in this way that *chesed* appears in today’s text. Verse 4 says, *“Your love (chesed) is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.”* And then in verse 6, *“For I desire mercy (chesed), not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.”*

So how does this have anything to do with being a community of worship? It has everything to do with being a community of worship! Israel was called to be a community of worship. They were to worship God and God alone. In their worship God would be glorified and the world would be changed. God gave them very specific things to do in their worship: sacrifices, offerings, festivals, Sabbath, work. All of those things were to be tangible expressions of an intangible love and acknowledgement and relationship with God. But somewhere along the way, Israel had lost her first love. The people of God had forgotten their identity in God. They were like Gomer, still married to Hosea but living unfaithfully to him. She was still Hosea’s wife by law, but not in heart and not in spirit. God speaks through the prophet to say, *“I don’t want empty worship practices, I want worshipful people full of love. Don’t just go through the motions and bring me your offerings, bring me your hearts!”*

This is a theme we see over and over again in the scriptures.

1 Samuel 15:22 *“Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.”*

Jeremiah 7:22-23 *“For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.”*

Psalms 51:16-17 *“You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”*

It’s not that the sacrifices are bad, but it’s that the heartless sacrifices people made to cover their bases with God are unacceptable to Him. Do you remember where this same verse from Hosea shows up in the New Testament? Leave your finger in Hosea and quickly flip over to Matthew 9. It describes Jesus’ calling of Matthew the tax collector. Matthew is so excited that he hosts a big party for Jesus in his house with other tax collectors and sinners. When the Pharisees, the most religious people in all of Israel, saw Jesus with ‘those’ kind of people, they were bothered and asked the disciples, *“Why is Jesus associated with people like this?”*

Matthew 9:12-13 *“On hearing this, Jesus said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”*

The Pharisees were zealous about obeying the Law of God completely. They even made up rules that kept them from getting close to breaking the rules that God had given His people. Yet, they were missing the point! Their worship was empty. God wanted their love; God wanted relationship; God wanted them to acknowledge Him, to know Him. And God wanted that to be lived out in the Pharisees' leadership of the people of God.

To be a community of worship means that together and individually we are growing in our love and acknowledgement of God. Hosea's Israel was missing it. The Pharisees were missing it.

I wonder, Are you missing it? Here you are at a worship service with your church, but are you just going through the motions? Are you writing the check for the offering, closing your eyes during the prayer, mouthing the words to the songs, and quietly listening during the sermon but all with an empty heart? Men, are you just here to please your wives? Women, are you going through the motions this morning with a smile on your face so that no one will know how screwed up things really are? Students, are you just here because your parents made you come or because you want to see that cute girl from youth group? Or are you here to meet with the Living God who created all of the universe, who loves you, who saves you and calls you His own?

Now those questions are for the members of this church. If you are a person here this morning who is not yet a follower of Jesus, but exploring what that means, here is what I want you to hear from the Bible passage we read today: God's first priority is not that you start to pay your taxes to Him. His first priority is that you learn to love Him with your heart and your mind and your soul and your strength – that you would acknowledge Him, that you would know Him. When that happens your life is changed and your heart is in the right spot.

But how do we get there? How do we develop a heart that loves the Lord? How do we nurture a heart of worship? How can we together become more of a community of worship?

Well let me demonstrate it this way. I grew up in the middle of an orange grove, and I have often wondered, "Who was the first person to figure out that there was fruit on the inside of this thing?" At some point someone must have wondered what that orange thing on the tree tasted like, so they gave it to their little brother and said, "try it" ... (take a bite of orange, peel and all) ... you know, it really doesn't taste too good like this. There's this protective shell around the good stuff on the inside.

I wonder if this is how you approach worship (put a complete orange on the front pew). You are here, you're going through the motions, but there's still this protective coating around your heart. How do we develop a heart of worship, a

heart of *chesed*? Either you start to peel back the layers and open yourself up to God or God might do it for you. Maybe it's like this ... (use the butcher knife to chop the orange into pieces). *"Come, let us return to the Lord. He has torn us to pieces but he will heal us; he has injured us but he will bind up our wounds."* (Hosea 6:1) *"You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."* (Psalm 51:16-17). Jesus said, *"go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'* For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." (place the chopped up orange on the front row) Now you're ready to worship. One of the ways that God is developing a heart of worship in me is to break me down, to chop me up, to kill me with His words so that I am open to His healing and to His love – so that I am grateful for His salvation – so that I'm reminded that my life is not about me. A heart of worship is priority one for followers of Christ – not just going through the motions and saying the right words, but a heart filled with *chesed* for God and for others.

May you have a heart tuned for worship. May your prayers and songs and offerings and work be pleasing in the Lord's sight because they represent your deep love for God. May we be a community of worship.

SERMON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- **Read the passage out loud.**
- **Reflect & Apply Individually:** Each person take 5-7 minutes to circle words or phrases that jumped out at them; jot down your reflections; check the notes in your Study Bible for insight or help. Grapple with what the Spirit is saying to you, your group, the church—write down some applications.
- **Reflect & Apply Together:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- **Pray together:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for and lay one concern before the Lord.
- **Dig deeper**
 1. What really sticks out to you about the scripture passage and the sermon?
 2. In what area of your life has it become more about sacrifice than mercy?
 3. How has the Lord broken you for His purposes?
 4. What does the Lord want you to do as a result of hearing this sermon and reading Hosea 6:1-6?