

Hosea 10:1-15
Prosperity Gospel?
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

What thing do you most want in life? If you had to pick the one thing that could make you most happy, what would it be?

There are lots of possible answers I guess. Lots of good possible answers. To have financial security... To bring up my children to make a useful contribution to society... To be remembered as someone who made a difference...

They're all things we might want.

But I think, if we went out and asked people on the streets of Liverpool this morning, what one thing they most want in life there would be a clear winner. I think, based on all the people I know and all the conversations I have that there is one thing people think will make them happier than anything else they can have. *Unconditional love.*

To be loved by someone who simply loves you. That's the kind of love that is celebrated in all of our culture's most famously positive songs and poems about love. What poems do people have at their weddings?

Well they might have Elizabeth Barrett Browning:
*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.*

Or they might have Shakespeare's 116th sonnet:
*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove:
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;*

They are both poems about unconditional love. Love whose soul and source is in the lover and which is fixed and boundless.

What do we want most in life? Well I think unconditional love makes a pretty good candidate.

All of which seems to be a pretty strange introduction to a passage that, you'll have noticed, is mostly about sin and judgment.

Like so much of Hosea, chapter 10 is a pronouncement by God of the way that he will bring punishment to the people of the nation of Israel for their unfaithfulness to him. They had

promised themselves to him, the living and true God, but had committed spiritual adultery by going off in all sorts of wrong directions – worshipping other gods, compromising with the standards of other nations and treating each other with terrible injustice and cruelty.

The passage ends with God's announcement of the inevitable destruction of the Israelite kingship and, with it, the end of their status as a nation. From then on they would be a "no-people" – a little ethnic subgroup scattered amongst the might of the Assyrian empire.

So what's all that got to do with unconditional love?

Well as we come nearer to the end of the book of Hosea we see new angles on the problem that the people of Israel faced.

We've known from the beginning that what they were guilty of was spiritual adultery. And we've seen in previous chapters that all sort of things in their nation – the behavior of the leaders, their determination to imitate the nations around them in all kinds of ways and the shallowness of their repentance amongst others – were putting them in a place of great danger as God was coming in judgment upon them.

But here in chapter 10 I think Hosea draws together the two things that most stood in the way of the people of Israel relating rightly with their God. And he shows us that those two things are really symptoms of just one thing. Just thing. One sin that lay at the root of all the problems of Israel. One sin that Christian theologians have identified as lying at the heart of the human problem since the dawn of time.

One sin that prevents us from accepting unconditional love.

So what are these terrible things?

Well the two things that Hosea picks out as being a particular problem for Israel were their reliance on the system of religion they had constructed and their dependence on their military strength.

They believed that they were good enough, religiously conscientious enough to merit God's protection.

And they believed that their army was strong enough to withstand any enemy.

You can see those two themes quite clearly in the passage.

Look first at v1. The nation of Israel had been prosperous – a spreading vine. And they thought that religious behavior was the reason for their success.

*As his fruit increased he built more altars;
As his land prospered, he adorned his sacred stones.*

As far as the people of Israel were concerned putting their hard earned cash back into altars for worship was just good business sense. They did the hard work to earn the favour of the gods – and they reaped the rewards.

Look next at v5. The people will mourn for the calf-idol of Beth-Aven. The calf idol was something that the kings of Israel had set up, generations earlier, to stop people going to Jerusalem to the temple God had ordered to be built.

In direct contradiction to what God had told them they created new shrines in two cities, supposedly to Yahweh, the Lord, the God of Israel, with great big wooden models of bulls, covered in layer upon layer of gold.

Then look at v8. High hills and mountains had always been sites of pagan worship. But the Israelites had joined in. This sin had become so common that Hosea can say “it is the sin of Israel”

Far from thinking that their worship was an abomination to God they thought it did them favours. They thought it was part of what protected them and ensured their wealth.

The second problem the people of Israel had is that they believed that their army was strong enough to withstand any enemy.

They were proud of their king – which is why it’s so shocking in v that God compares him to a twig – not even a decent enough stick to beat someone with.

God is explicit about it in V13 – they have depended on their own strength and on their many warriors.

These were the two things that most stood in the way of the people of Israel relating rightly with their God.

But one sin lay behind them both.

Can you, in the words of Rolf Harris, tell what it is yet?

This thing that lies at the heart of the human problem? This thing that prevents us from accepting unconditional love? Pride. It’s pride.

Fundamentally this passage is all about their pride. Because it’s such a fundamental sin it’s fair to say that lots of passages in the Bible are God’s testimony against our pride.

But in Hosea 10 in particular I think there are three things we need to learn and take heed of today about pride:

We need to...

I Believe pride traps us

When you look at the pride of Israel it’s quite easy to spot. You can see evidences of it in almost every verse of the passage.

In v1 their pride is seen in the way that they respond to prosperity not with grateful thanks but with more and more works of religion – as if it was their work that had brought the blessing in the first place. Hosea brings that out for us by describing ironically how they thought about things:

*“he brought forth fruit for **himself**. As **his** fruit increased **he** built more altars; as **his** land prospered, **he** adorned **his** sacred stones.”*

Hosea wants to point up for us the way that people in their pride have totally twisted the truth. For in reality it was always God’s land and God’s fruit.

And pride is not removed even by disaster striking. In v3, when judgment and punishment have overtaken them what will the people of Israel say? Well the NIV gets the middle sentence slightly wrong. The tone is something like:

“We have no king. We do not fear the Lord. Even if we had a king, what could he do for us?”

They are so convinced of their own goodness and ability that they do not see how anybody else could help them. Even in a down and out situation they are determined not to accept help from another in their pride.

You could multiply examples through the rest of the passage.

Pride in Israel is easy to spot. Just like the pride of the Pharisees when you read the gospels is easy to spot.

But what is not easy to spot is your own pride.

And Hosea recognizes that here. Look at v2 – their heart is deceitful. That word could also be translated smooth or, even better, slippery.

They have slippery hearts. And so do we.

Pride is one of the most dangerous of all things because it is so hard to see when you're indulging in it.

And in that way it's different to quite a lot of other sins. If you are getting drunk you usually realize that you are getting drunk. If you are lusting after a man or woman in your heart you're usually aware of that. If you are lying to make a good impression you know in your heart that you are telling an untruth. But pride is slippery. So slippery it can even deceive you.

And religious observance, morality, ethics, will always fail to root out pride. Because pride flourishes in religious soils. They are like compost for it.

The feeling that you are superior, which is one form of pride, loves the idea that you can be morally better than others by following certain rules or turning up to church now and again – or even twice a week. Many of the proudest people in the history of the world have been very religious – and have despised the irreligious and looked down their perfectly moral noses at them, just like the people of Israel did here, just like the Pharisees did in Jesus' day.

The feeling that you are inferior, which is another form of pride, loves religion too. Where else but church can you go every week for a dose of feeling guilty and beaten up about yourself? Of you want to feel like a worm religious places are the places to be. It's still pride of course – because just like the superiority form of pride it puts you and how you feel about you and how other people feel about you at the centre of the universe.

The truth is, isn't it, is that we have slippery hearts. That we too can be ensnared by pride, sometimes without even realizing it because we're self-deceived.

I guess some people here are superior types who love to look down your noses at people who are less intelligent, less beautiful, less able in some way that you are.

You might express that very nicely in the form of pity, but you still look down.

Pride isn't acknowledging that you are intelligent – pride is finding satisfaction in being more intelligent than someone else.

Pride is finding having another person in your social circle who knows more than you or who looks better than you or who dresses better than you threatening.

Others here will have the inferiority form of pride. The kind of pride that refuses to serve in the church because you're not gifted enough. The kind of pride that means you spend your life talking about your problems to everyone you meet just so they know how hard done by you are in life.

The first and most important thing to do with pride is to see that you suffer from it and to see that it is a slippery thing and that you need to be frightened of it.

The second thing to do with pride is to recognize God's determination to remove it.

2 Recognize God's determination to remove all sources of pride

You see in his great mercy God didn't just smite the people of Israel straight away whenever they started sinning in their pride – and a good job too or they would never have lasted five minutes.

But as they go on and on trusting in things that God has told them not to trust in. That God has told them to get rid of. As they continue not to listen to Hosea and the other prophet God has sent. Eventually God says I will visibly and clearly judge the people.

And he says he will do that in a way that is perfectly fitting to their crime and that ought to make them realize the folly of their pride and repent and be healed.

Firstly God is going to remove the religious idols that they thought would keep them in divine favour. V2 there the altars and sacred stones they thought increased their prosperity will be demolished and destroyed.

V5 the idols of gold will be shown up for what they really are. God is really brutal with them in these verses. Look at that he says to them. He says that the people of Samaria, the capital city of Israel, will be afraid for the idol.

What kind of a God is it that you have to worry about when you go to bed at night? Not a very good one.

Hosea calls it the idol of Beth-Aven – house of evil. So no one can be in any doubt what God thinks of this golden calf.

And in fact, he says, these people who claim to follow God have become so bound up with the idol that they are now, v5 there, its people and its priests. They no longer belong to the living god who made the universe.

They belong to a big gold bull.

And what will happen to the big gold bull. Well, v6, it will be carried off, taken into exile, given to another king as tribute,

What almost certainly happened historically was that only part of the idol was taken away. The king of Assyria who was threatening Israel probably wouldn't have wanted their gods. He probably wasn't interested in their gods. He would have wanted cash. And Hosea seems to envisage in these verses that the calf idol will be stripped of its layers of gold, which will be carted away to Assyria, and that the people will be left with just the shell, the wooden bull that is underneath.

They will see their God for what it is and, v6, they will be ashamed of their wooden idols. It is all going to be exposed for the cheap charade it really is.

God is going to remove their religious reliance, their idols.

Secondly God is going to break the military power they relied on.

The invading armies, Hosea says, will come like floodwater and the capital city and its king will be like nothing more than a piece of driftwood that gets washed downstream with the rest of the rubbish generated by the storm.

Now we know from reading the rest of Hosea that it wasn't raw military might that they relied upon. Israel wasn't some ancient version of an American redneck thinking "oh well we can always nuke 'em" about any country that causes problems.

No ancient Israel was more like Britain. They knew that in a straight fight they would lose to a nation with a really big army. But they relied on what they thought of as their cleverness, their diplomatic nous and their strategic thinking with their forces to "punch above their weight" in the international arena.

But they will experience a judgment so overwhelming that, according to v14, all their cities will be destroyed. A fight so humiliating that not a

soul will be left alive. Men, women, children. The very oldest to the new born baby. Thrown onto the rocks or run through with the sword.

God, v15, will completely destroy the king of Israel. It was the king in whom all their religious life and all their military strength were bound up. And God says it will just come to nothing. You see for all the people of the human race and especially for those who claim to be his people God is determined to root out and expose and punish pride.

Because pride in the end is always setting me up as God. It is always making me the centre of the universe. Making me the one around whom the attention and the adoration of others ought to revolve for by brilliance or my beauty.

How does God break pride?

Well in the world he does it in many ways. He breaks the powers of empires in history one after another after another. So that anyone who has read the Bible can have no doubt that whatever superpowers there are in the world at the moment – the United States, China, Europe – will one day be nothing but dust and ashes and memories. He will not stand for the pride of nations.

In the lives of cities and companies and individuals God so arranges circumstances as well that our pride is curtailed. Stock markets crash, fortunes are lost great ambitions are thwarted.

In the church too God is at work rooting out and curtailing pride. He does it, doesn't he, first of all by choosing all sorts of unlikely and improbably people to be the church in the first place. So that you look around and think this is a bunch of people with nothing to be proud of.

He does it by ensuring that whenever the church loves and receives great worldly wealth it ends up declining in spiritual power. He does it by ensuring that church that think they grow by their own strength end up declining and dying.

Now not all of those things happen reliably by some human timetable. Not all of them are neat and predictable. But take a look around the world and you will see that God is at work in human history rooting out pride.

But the main way he does it, the main way in which God limits our arrogant ambition and our thirst to take his place as the centre of the universe, is death.

It is the reality of death. The fact that one day you will meet with God and that one day this life will be

no more that, more than anything else, can limit our pride. And that was true for Israel.

Let's not be mealy mouthed about it. The things that God announces to the people of Israel through Hosea in this book are all about death for them. It is the judgment of death. Death for the nation as a nation and death for many tens of thousands of individuals - men and women and children.

And still today the reality of death should chasten us, just as it should have chastened them. It should rebuke us. It should make us think about a different perspective. We are not masters of the universe. We are not the centre of the universe. We can't even ensure our ongoing existence in the universe. The reality of total destruction, v15, should tell us more than anything else that God is determined to root out pride.

All of the things that are the sources of our reliance. For them the idols and the military and diplomatic strategy. For us the careers and the property and the looks and the fitness and the wit and the strength. All of it is vain and useless. And death will reveal the pointlessness of it all to us.

So what must we do? Well it's obvious really isn't it! We must repent of our pride.

We must say "sorry". We must get down on our knees before Gods and acknowledge that the universe is about him and his glory not me and mine.

That the things that give us security and meaning are nothing before the mighty judge of the earth. We must repent. The trouble is - we can't.

Because the third thing we need to do in response to pride is...

3 Miraculously embrace unconditional love

You see Hosea announced the judgment of God.

He exposed their love of idols and how useless it was. He exposed their stupidity and he called upon them to repent and turn to God. But what does he say is going to happen?

Well it's not revival! Look at v8 to see what really happens when god comes in judgment on the people...

Read v8.

What happens? Not great repentance is it?

These people would rather die than admit that they are wrong. They would rather see nothing, buried beneath eternal depths of stone than they would see that their way of life was wrong and proud and all about them. Why?

Because they will not face up to the consequence of admitting their error. Look at v12 there (read).

Hosea says what is going to happen in history is that these people will die rather than take God's righteousness.

They would rather die than accept that there is no good in them and that they need righteousness as a gift from God.

They would rather perish than accept unconditional love.

As much as we say we want unconditional love Hosea tells us otherwise.

Because unconditional love is love that is nothing to do with you. It is love that is not extracted from someone as a response to your beauty or your worthiness. It is love that originates in the lover. Love that is all about him and nothing about you. And we don't like that kind of love.

Because we want to be loved because people think we're lovely.

Girls I know you want a boyfriend who loves you because he thinks you're hot.

Boys I know you want mates who love you because you are funny and generous.

We want to be loved because of something about us. We're not impressed when our lover answers the questions "why do you love me?"... with the answer just because I do. We want him to say "because you're so kind and gentle." We want her to say "because you make me feel so safe."

And that's not the love God offers us. What he offers is to come and shower righteousness on us, v12. What he offers is to love us because of who he is, not because of who we are. And sinful human beings like me and like you cannot deal with that kind of love.

We can cope with a love that loves us because we're great because that feeds our pride.

And we can deal with a love that says it loves us unconditionally and merely allows us to do whatever we want which is, of course, not love but simply indifference.

What we cannot handle, you and I, is truly unconditional love. Love that longs to transform us because it is real love, but that is drawn from the heart the lover simply because that is the kind of God he is and not because we are in any way worthy of his affection.

For the people of Israel it was too late to embrace that love. God had already announced the judgment that was coming on their nation. It was too late for them.

But it is not too late for us. Until you die or Jesus returns there is time to embrace that unconditional love. It requires a miracle but the God of the Bible specialises in those.

What do you have to do?

Well it's simply therein v12. You have to seek him, you have to look for him, You have to see him as the centre of the universe. You have to embrace the righteousness that he offers as a gift and stop trying to earn his affection.

And the time to do it Hosea says is now.

It is time to seek the Lord today. This minute.

You see the thing about your life and mine is that all of the past is gone. It is beyond recall and you cannot change it. And all of the future is uncertain because it's only shadows to us isn't it? Our next breath may be our last.

And that means that now is the time to embrace the righteousness of God which he offers you through Jesus Christ.

Whether you have done it 1000 times before or whether this is a first for you this is the moment of repent of your pride. Don't leave this morning without accepting unconditional love afresh.

The love that loves you in spite of who you are simply because God is who God is.

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24th February 2008