

Hosea 5:1-6:6

Sorry seems to be the hardest word

Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

For some of us it's the moment when we turn off the computer after we've finished masturbating to a pornographic web site or horny chat room conversation.

For some of us it's the moment we bury our head in our hands after yet another pointless argument with our spouse or housemate.

For some of us it's the feeling of regret we have as soon as we get home after buying another item of clothing that we know we don't need and can't afford.

For some of us it goes with swallowing the first Alka-Seltzer after another night of one too many.

For some of us it's the pangs of regret just after we've harangued someone about some issue we think is important but where really we've just enjoyed tearing a strip off them.

For some of us it's the knowledge that we didn't take the opportunity we ought to have done to share the gospel with someone at work because we're a bit concerned about our end of year bonus prospects.

For all of us, from time to time, and probably very frequently for most of us the question arises: why is it so hard to stop sinning?

Sorry, in itself, might not be the hardest word – it trips off the tongue easily. But, as we say often to our 3 year old daughter, being truly sorry means seeking not to do something again. And that, we all know, is very difficult to do.

But why is that? Why is it so hard to stop sinning?

If you've been with us for the first 4 instalments of our series in the book of Hosea you'll know that Israel, the northern part of the divided kingdom given by God to his people, is facing God's judgment. And you'll remember that Hosea the prophet has not only been using the striking metaphor of prostitution to describe the essence of the people's wickedness in departing from God...

He has also been placed by God in a situation where his own life story mirrors the experience of God – Hosea's bride, Gomer, is unfaithful without reason and behaves like a prostitute chasing after other men. Eventually Hosea has to track her down, buy her out of slavery and almost imprison her, confining her in close quarters with himself so

that she cannot go off and play the whore with other men.

Why are such drastic means necessary? Why, to apply the metaphor to the people of Israel, does God have to come upon them in judgment?

Well the answer is simple: God comes in judgment because they will not stop sinning.

But that, of course, just pushes us back to another questions. If God is so clear, and he is really clear, about the fact that he will come in judgment if they don't stop sinning...

Why don't they just stop sinning?

If sin, rebelling against God, not obeying his word, is really stupid, which it is, and if it has terrible consequences, which it does, why don't they, and we, just stop it? Why do we find it so hard to stop sinning?

In Hosea 5 & 6, God continues to explain both how he will judge the people of Israel and why. And this morning we're going to focus particularly on the "why" elements as we look through these verses.

The chapters, and the things that are announced in them, one after another, bang, bang, bang are slightly chaotic and overwhelming. But that, as we'll see, reflects the times in which they were written.

In these chapters, though, we'll see six reasons why we find it so hard to stop sinning...

I Because our leaders encourage sin (5:1-3)

Hosea opens this section with a blast against the leaders of the people of Israel. Three times he calls for people to listen – hear this, pay attention, listen. And each time he calls for particular attention from a group of leaders:

- First the priests, the religious leaders of the nation.
- Second the Israelites which here refers to all the leaders of the "house of Israel" – the heads of tribes and clans and families.
- Third the royalty – the king and his princes and nobles and advisors.

For each of these people – who were meant to be the ones who pronounced judgments, who decided things on behalf of the Lord and kept the people

following God – judgments are going out against them.

They are meant to be shepherds and carers for the people. But instead what have they been – nets and snares. Instead of helping the people the leaders of the nation have hindered them, led them astray. And they have done it so wilfully and actively that it as if they have gone out and hunted the people down.

Throughout Hosea, throughout all the writing of the Old Testament prophets in fact, God condemns all people for their sin. But he is always, and continually, particularly clear about how awful and terrible it is to be a wicked leader.

Because it is a basic principle of human societies, part of the way we are wired, that people and communities do, in general, follow the words and examples of their leaders.

It seems that one of the faults of the leaders of Israel was that they were so obsessed with the twin goals of national security and economic growth that they were prepared to do all sorts of things God had said were wicked to secure their aims. Which sounds startlingly like most Western politicians today – both those who claim to be Christian and those who do not.

Why are we all so obsessed with having more money this year than last year that people are prepared to commit all sorts of wickedness in order to achieve that goal? Well it's at least partly because our national leaders keep telling us that the growth of the economy is the most important thing on their agenda. Not justice. Not peace. Not moral failure. But money.

Of course these verses aren't mostly about national leaders in any old nation. And it's completely ridiculous of us to expect unbelievers of any political party to reflect God's values in any consistent way in leading our nation or any other nation.

These verses are mostly about the leaders of God's people – the church. Now the leaders of a local Christian church are not in exactly the same position, theologically speaking, as the leaders of ancient Israel. But still the New Testament sees it as particularly important that the leaders of the church are helpful to their church families.

Why do God's people find it so hard to stop sinning? Well at least part of the reason is that those who claim to be church leaders encourage sin.

Why do so many Christians struggle with their sexuality? Surely partly because there are so many church leaders who don't uphold the Bible's teaching on marriage.

Why do so many Christians struggle with materialism? Surely partly because people like me are often not noticeably different to the rest of the world in our attitude to money.

I could add dozens more examples. Sometimes church leaders directly undermine fellow believers by their lifestyles or actions. More often, I think, they can undermine people in their churches by simply not doing their job and clearly teaching and applying God's words to the lives of the church family.

That's why the New Testament teaches that church leaders should both be able to teach the Bible clearly and live lives that reflect its teaching.

And it's why, even as in our church you must be forgiving and merciful towards the church leaders you must also be clear in your expectations that we must teach you the Bible and model its message in our lives.

2 Because we do not know God (5:4)

But it's not just leaders who are to blame in Israel, or today, for the people's sin. The people themselves are responsible - they cannot go back to God because they do not know him.

As we've seen a couple of times already the NIV always translates as "acknowledge" a word that is better translated "know" in Hosea. It's an intimate word. A personal word. So intimate that it is used throughout the Bible as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. To "know" somebody is such an intimate thing that it describes sexual liaisons.

But they do not know God. They are not intimate with God – loving him, caring for him, longing for him to be with them. Why? Because they are too busy "knowing" other gods – like a prostitute.

Anyone who is not a Christian, by definition, cannot and does not know God. So everything about your life, if you are not a Christian here this morning, is done in ignorance of and rebellion against the will of the one who created the universe and you. We sin because we do not know God.

But Christians too sin because we do not know God. That's an odd thing to say. Because it is almost the definition of being a follower of Jesus that you do know God!

But although God has perfectly revealed himself in Jesus. Although God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in anyone who trusts Jesus. And although the destiny of every Christian is perfect knowledge of God... it is still possible for us not to be living in a way that cultivates intimate knowledge of God.

We sin when we are not thinking about the beauty, care and kindness of God. When we wrongly believe him to be out to limit us, spoil our fun or make us miserable. When we are not delving in the pages of his word to see his grace and mercy or responding to him in prayer to praise his goodness.

The people of Israel did not know God because they turned away from the covenant he had made with them through Moses. And when we forget the covenant God has made with us through Jesus... When we forget the identity, the work, the cross and the resurrection of Jesus other things seem much more attractive than they really are – and we come to desire and want them as the rest of the world does...

When we do not know God... we sin too.

3 Because we are proud (5:5)

The people of Israel found it impossible to stop sinning because they were arrogant.

Arrogance cannot admit of sin. Because admitting your sin means debasing yourself. It means saying God is right and you are wrong. It means weeping and sorrow. It is in every way the opposite of pride.

They stumble in their sin – like an elderly person who will not admit that he is frail and needs a stick their pride has become something that causes them to trip up again and again.

When we start to think that ours is the best church in the city how will we ever be able to admit our sin? When we think we've been chosen as a housegroup leader because of our Bible handling prowess how will we ever be able to admit our fallibility? When we think that God is on our side how will we ever be able to understand his discipline?

Unless we constantly repent of pride our church will become like so many in our city. Full of chairs and empty of people with a core of old men and women muttering about how faithful we've been and how apostate people are in 2040 not to want to come and sing songs from the noughties. We will reminisce about how great we were in the olden days in an empty hall as God's judgment goes unnoticed by us in our arrogance. And we will keep on sinning...

And now Hosea brings us to what is in many ways the heart of the matter.

We find it hard to stop sinning...

4 Because God hides himself from us (5:6-12)

When I was a university student a Christian friend gave me a little aphorism; a saying. It went like this...

"If you feel far away from God... guess who moved."

What my friend was intending to say, of course, was that if I am in a place where I feel alienated from the Lord then it is not because he is to blame or at fault in any way.

But whilst it's certainly true that the Israelites are completely responsible for the mess they are in Hosea would disagree with my friend's slightly trite evangelical cliché.

Because here in 5:6 he tells us that when the people do come and seek God they will find that he has moved. He withdraws himself from them.

They are unfaithful to him, v7, therefore within a month – the time from one new moon to the next – they will be devoured.

The people who claim to be his people but who have consistently abandoned, rejected and turned away from God are going to find that simply turning up at a holy place with a shed load of sheep to sacrifice is not going to be enough to turn the situation around.

God is going to make them live with the consequences of their sin – he is going to bring his judgment.

The next verses explain how, in Hosea's time, that was historically going to come about.

It was going to be through war. The trumpet sounding in v8 is the call to battle of the watchman on the city walls. But it will do no good. Ephraim, just another word for Israel, will be destroyed.

What happened historically was the at a moment when Israel was weak because they were being attacked from the north by Assyria, Judah, the other half of the people of God, attacked from the south. They invaded a part of the land of God's people that wasn't theirs – that's why God accuses them, v10, of being wicked land grabbers – like people who move boundary stones.

The result? Bloodshed and death for both Israel and Judah – all of God’s people suffer.

In v12 God makes it clear that the invasions and wars are his doing and he uses a gruesome picture to describe his judgment on them. Taking the image of a gravely injured soldier on the battle field he says that he is like pus (not a moth!) to Ephraim, like rot to the people of Judah. God is inflicting on his people, as just judgment for their sin, something that is like a gangrenous, stinking open wound.

We sin because God hides himself from us. Now we need to say that there are some difficulties here. The Bible constantly holds on to the twin realities that God is sovereign over everything, even sin, and yet is untainted and untouched by evil and sin himself.

God is quite clear here that HE brings the judgment on the people and yet we have seen that it is equally clear that the people are responsible for the judgment coming.

All of our sin is in some way a mark of God’s hiding himself from us. And yet our sin is our fault not God’s.

As I say there are some hard things here.

But the solution is clear. We must recognise that by right God ought to withdraw his presence from us and hide so that we are in darkness and death.

And we should praise him that because of Jesus he promises he will be with every Christian always.

And we should strive to hate thinking, feeling, saying or doing anything that we know God would desire to withdraw from.

5 Because we look for help in the wrong places (5:13-15)

The threat of foreign invasion and war was something you would have thought would have made the people of Israel turn back to God.

After all a period of national prosperity made them forget the goodness and provision of God. Perhaps a national disaster will focus their minds on crying out to God for rescue as it did for the people of Israel so many times before in the period of the Judges?

Not at all. At the first hint of trouble what do they do? They turn to the regional superpower for help. Instead of a prayer meeting they hand God’s money over to pagans for a kind of international

protection racket – we won’t destroy your nation if you give us cash.

And is that not often exactly what we do too?

God in his mercy disciplines us by making the career we idolise something that makes us ill with anxiety and worry. And instead of repenting and seeking our satisfaction in God, instead of actually changing what we do we run off to our GP to get something, anything, that will keep us functional without really changing anything about how we think and live.

The church budget is a bit short. So we think “who in the church has more money than me and can give to sort it out.”

Our nation suffers from a lack of national cohesion. So instead of trying to share the gospel of Jesus that alone can unite people of all nations we suggest greater use of Sharia law to solve our social problems.

None of this is to say that it is always wrong to seek cooperation with other people, Christian or not, to solve problems. It is not to reject the wonders of modern medicine. It is not to suggest that we shouldn’t think carefully about how to order society.

But in the final analysis we sin and will carry on sinning more and more whenever we think that security, life or hope are to be found anywhere other than in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And finally we sin...

6 Because our repentance is shallow (6:1-6)

It looks like the beginning of revival. Indeed quote a lot of the commentaries on Hosea take it exactly like that – Hosea’s prayer for revival amongst the people. It picks up on all the images of the previous chapter.

- God has torn them like a lion – but he will heal them.
- He has been like pus in their wounds but he will cleanse and bandage them with fresh dressings.
- His wrath has been like a flood – but his mercy will come like spring showers.

It’s the model prayer of repentance. But, and here’s the rub, it’s not genuine. See how God responds to it in v4:

“Your love is like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears.”

Yes my love is as sure as the sunrise. The trouble is, God says, as soon as my face shines blessing on you like the mist before the sun your love disappears and you are rebelling and sinning all over again.

You can almost sense despair in God’s voice as he asks the people what he is to do with them – I’ve sent the prophets with words as sharp as swords and you didn’t listen. I’ve sent terrible physical judgments that have been as clear as everything lit up by lightning.

I’ve given you a law that makes it so, so plain that what matters is not merely the animal sacrifices but the heart of repentance that needs to lie behind those sacrifices...

And what do they do? They say they’re sorry – and then go and do exactly the same sins all over again.

I’m sure that when they said those things the Israelites kind of meant them. They did feel bad about their sin – and especially they felt bad about the consequences of it for themselves.

They did believe that God was gracious and would forgive and restore them.

But it was all shallow. It was quickly forgotten. And because they had not allowed the wonderful truths about God’s mercy and blessing to run deep, deep in their hearts and lives, as soon as something more exciting came along they went running after that instead.

Like a man who tells his wife how much he loves her and as he finishes his sentence another woman with a fantastic figure walks past and he stares at her all the way down the street.

Their desire is right – they should want to know the Lord. They should press on to gain his blessings. But they are oh so easily distracted.

They, and we, indulge ourselves in shallow repentance for a bit of religious good feeling, and then just go back to how we were before.

What do they need? What do we need?

Well what they needed, as the cure for all these causes of their sin was a powerful miracle of God.

They would be transformed by nothing less than a new heart. A whole new life was the only way these people were ever going to change.

If you are not a Christian here this morning and you are aware of sin. Aware that you do not live as God would have you live. Aware that you keep on going back to sin again and again even after you have resolved not to again and again. If you want ever to change there is only one hope for you – a new heart, a new birth, a new life. The very thing that Jesus says he offers you by simply putting your trust in him. So why not so that this morning?

But, you might say, look at all the Christians here. I know that they suffer from all this too. They resolve again and again not to sin and break their resolutions repeatedly. How can this be?

Well there are two things we must say to finish to apply this passage to the Christian.

The first is that you can know victory over sin as a Christian in a way that is not possible for anyone who does not trust Jesus. If you are a Christian here this morning you do have a Spirit in you, a new heart, a new power to fight and defeat the sinful nature that dwells within you.

You are in a better place than the people who heard Hosea’s message. They had to cry out to God to send a saviour to rescue them – for us he has already come. His name is Jesus Christ and he is Lord and victor over sin.

What does that mean? It means we must listen to his words in Hosea, take heed of the warnings, do what he says and trust that he will empower us to be more obedient tomorrow than we are today and on and on through the rest of our lives.

The second thing we must say to finish is that the great day of victory has not arrived yet. The final day when 6:11, God restores the fortunes of his people, still lies in the future, at the time of the return of Jesus.

Until that day we will still sin, we will still struggle and though we should know increasing godliness in our lives we will also cry with the apostle Paul “who will rescue me from this body of death.”

And we will need each other to reply “Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Andrew Evans, February 2008