

Scandalous Love

What's the unhappiest place to live in America? The U. S. National Bureau of Economic Research did a study to find out. [I wonder how many millions of tax dollars this cost us?] But you know what they found? The bigger the city, the unhappier the people. So then, why do so many people live in big cities? The researchers concluded that people are willing to live in an "unhappy" city in exchange for something else – like a bigger paycheck OR being close to people they love. ⁱ

One theme the world gets right at Christmas is the central theme of love. We usually call that "The Christmas Spirit." Older holiday movies really get this right; films like *A Christmas Carol* or *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* or *It's A Wonderful Life*. These films all share the theme of overlooking bad behavior and treating people as they don't deserve.

But the "real" Christmas story goes beyond even being extraordinarily kind and forgiving. It demonstrates a love that some might say, "goes too far." The love of Christmas is a scandalous love. The word "scandalous" is defined as that which is "improper, disgraceful or shocking." "But," you say, "Christmas is about a little innocent baby and a father who is "righteous" and a mother to whom the angel Gabriel says:

...you have found favor with God. (Luke 1:30)

"So, where's the scandal?" Well, let's dig a little deeper. First, we'll find that...

I. Christmas Love Makes the First Move.

In a love relationship, somebody has to make the first move, right? When I was growing up it was considered "scandalous," "improper" for a girl to make the first move in getting to know a boy. So, girls didn't call boys to ask them out on a date. (Yes, telephones had been invented before I was a teenager!) So, if a girl wanted to get a boy to "ask her out," she had to use various, shall we say, "creative means" of getting his attention. You know, like accidentally running into him in the hallway or spilling food on him in the lunchroom.

Some of you who are students today are saying, "How ridiculous was that! Playing silly games!" Yeah, really? Like you don't play the same games today? You might not go on an "official" date, but don't you play those same games just to get that person to know that you exist? You find out what their schedule is and "just happen to show up" at the mall when they're there. What a coincidence! Or you find out that they work at a pizza place. You walk in, "Whoa! Don't you go to my school? What a coincidence!" Yeah, I know that texting has replaced a lot of older forms of conversation, but be honest – texting is just a means to an end; the end is to be physically present with the person you want to get to know.

The one thing that's true about Jesus Christ is this: you don't have play games with Him. In fact, Jesus isn't waiting for you to notice that He exists. He's already made the first move. He's doing "old-school" texting through this book. He's in your

dreams, He's showing up in your life in calculated ways. Why? Because He wants to have a personal relationship with you.

Now, don't get me wrong, Jesus isn't a stalker. Stalkers are scary. Why? Because they don't respect your boundaries. They want to force you into a relationship with them that you don't want. Jesus never disrespects us or our boundaries. This is what the apostle John is describing in his letter when he says:

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. (I John 4:9)

It says, "...that we MIGHT live through him," not that we MUST live through him. Jesus wants to have a relationship with us but He'll never force it. We see that when He looked over Jerusalem and said that He wanted desperately to have a personal relationship with them but, He said:

...you were not willing! (Luke 13:34)

He didn't say, "You were not willing, so I forced you into it because I know what you need better than you do!" No, Jesus respects us and our boundaries.

But He's also not aloof, playing hard to get. In fact, how many of us, if we found out that someone had repeatedly broken the law, would still pursue a friendship with that person? Probably not many of us! But this is exactly what Jesus does. He...

...demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Rom. 5:8)

That's not just unusual, that's down right scandalous. And that's Christmas love.

II. Christmas Love Believes We Can Change (or Rather BE Changed).

Christmas is God acting like the Old Testament prophet Hosea. Do you know the story of Hosea? God commands the prophet Hosea to marry an "adulterous wife" as a means of symbolizing His own relationship with the nation of Israel. Some people today think that all sin is equally detestable to God. It's all painful to Him, but some sin is more painful than others. And let's admit it, this is also true with us, isn't it?

If you're married or even just in a serious relationship, all your significant other's sins are not equal, are they? If they lose their temper and shout at you, that's one thing, but it's not equal to their having dinner with an old girlfriend and then lying about it, is it? Why not? Because one signifies a level of insensitivity, while the other signifies unfaithfulness. The entire book of Hosea is about Israel's unfaithfulness and what God is going to do about it.

By chapter three, Hosea's wife, Gomer, has been unfaithful to him many, many times. Now look what God says:

The LORD said to me, "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 the sacred raisin cakes." (Hosea 3:1)

Please note two things. First, notice God's definition of love. God commanded Hosea to "love" his adulteress wife. Most Americans think that love is an emotion, something we "fall into" and "out of." We think that we have no control over it. So, to command someone to "love" someone else makes no sense to us.

But this is not a biblical definition of love. The Bible commands us to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*” (Deut. 6:5) And to “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*” (Lev. 19:18) Biblical love is a decision that is followed by disciplined behavior. You say, “Well, that sounds awfully cold! Are you saying biblical love is devoid of emotion?” No, not at all. But it’s not ruled by emotion. The emotions of love are ruled by godly discipline. And isn’t that exactly what we expect from anyone we give our love to?

This is what God is demanding from Hosea. God is saying, “Hosea, I know Gomer has hurt you and hurt you deeply. But I’m commanding you to discipline your emotions and love her anyway.” Why is God asking this of Hosea? Because this is what He Himself is doing with Israel:

Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes. (Hosea 3:1b)

A definition of love is the first thing we see here. But the second thing is actually something that is quite profound. Dr. Charles Feinberg was a renowned Hebrew scholar. He grew up in Pittsburgh in an Orthodox Jewish community and trained to be a rabbi. Then, in 1930 he converted to Christianity and eventually taught at several evangelical seminaries, including both Dallas and Talbot Seminaries. Dr. Feinberg stated that Hosea 3...

...rightfully takes its place among the greatest prophetic pronouncements in the whole revelation of God. ⁱⁱ

What is he talking about? God is describing the longstanding relationship He will have with Israel and what He is prepared to do to win back those He loves. Verses 4 and 5 describe the future. Verse four says that they will live many days without an intimate relationship with one another, but then, verse five says:

Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days. (Hosea 3:5)

What will God do to make this happen? Hosea will follow God’s lead. Verse 2: **So I bought her** (and it tells what he paid).

Do you see what sin does to your life? It takes away your freedom. It puts you in such a severe slavery that you must be “bought out” of it just as Gomer had to be “bought out” of her prostitution slavery to her pimp. I know this is unsavory language and an unsavory imagery, but this is also the Word of God! This is a direct quote from God! If you can’t stomach it, then you should probably go to another church. There are plenty of churches in this area where you will never hear a sermon on this passage. But I’m preaching on it because it absolutely is the key to understanding the real love of Christmas.

Now, look how our passage from I John helps us understand Hosea. I Jn. 4:10: **This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**

The phrase “atoning sacrifice” in the Greek is one word – *hilasmon*. In older English translations we find the word “propitiation.” What does it mean? It means “the turning away of wrath by an offering.” Hosea did not just go find Gomer and say, “Okay, enough of this. I forgive you so come on home.” No. He had to buy her, a

price was paid to set her free. God was having Hosea act out exactly what He had to do for Israel: buy her back by paying a redemption price for her.

Believing in the Christmas story alone will not save you. If you only believe that Jesus was miraculously born and grew up to live a good life that you can model your life after, you will go to hell. Why? Because you and I have spiritually committed adultery. All sin is a form of spiritual adultery and it attracts the wrath of God like a magnet. The only way to deflect the wrath of God is to receive the redemption of Jesus Christ. Redemption means to “buy back,” to “pay the price” just as Hosea had to “buy back” Gomer from her pimp.

But being bought was just the first part of Gomer’s salvation. Next Hosea said: (Hosea 3:3)

Then I told her, “You are to live with me many days; you must not be a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will live with you.”

We don’t live in obedience to our Redeemer SO THAT we can be bought. We’re bought and then we live in obedience. I Cor. 6:19 and 20 says:

You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Do you see it? There’s no such thing as a ‘self-help’ salvation! You cannot clean up your life, get rid of your sinful habits and, by doing so, “divert the wrath of God.” No! You can’t make yourself attractive so God will redeem you. No, you need to see yourself for what you are: an unfaithful, lying, cheating, disrespectful tramp like Gomer, who deserves not salvation but the wrath of God. Until you get to that mindset, you cannot be saved! But when you do, now, NOW, anything is possible!

- Any addiction can be removed.
- Any bad habit can be reversed.
- Any illness can be healed.
- Any ignorance can be replaced by wisdom.

Sanctification doesn’t come before redemption. Redemption always comes before sanctification. First you are bought, then you can live. It was true for Gomer. It will be true for the nation of Israel. It will be true for you. This is all because Christmas love believes people can change, not by their own power but by the power of the Spirit within, once they’ve been redeemed. It’s scandalous love!

Do you believe that? Who is it that you’ve given up on? You’ve spent a million hours, you’ve tried a million programs, you’ve wasted a million dollars trying to get this person’s life turned around. You don’t have any more hours, programs or dollars to spend! This person just will NOT change! They’re hopeless!!

But the question isn’t whether or not YOU can change them. The question is whether or not God can change them. So, I agree. You should stop spending your time, your effort and your money to change that person. Turn them over to God. Do one thing, but do it regularly, do it passionately: love them by praying for them. And right now, pray one thing – pray that God will show them their sin, so that they will cry out to God to redeem them. God’s scandalous love will do the rest.

These five, short verses from Hosea show us God’s communicating to the nation of Israel a message that eventually He will communicate to all people on Earth. Gomer had lived many days in unfaithfulness to her husband, Hosea, before she was redeemed. Verses 4 & 5 prophesy that Israel will do the same thing:

For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days. (Hosea 3:4, 5)

This is predicting that, before Jesus returns a second time, there will be a major revival in Israel. It says that they will “seek the LORD their God and David their king.” Hosea lived 250 years after David died! He can’t be talking about the historical David. Then whom is he talking about? Jesus!! This matches what Isaiah 11 and Rom. 11 say when they speak of a spiritual renewal in future Israel. (Rom. 11:26, 27)

And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

**“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.**

And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.”

So, there’s great hope for Israel, and there’s great hope for the most lost person you know. Christopher Yuan is proof of that. Christopher was here just two weeks ago. If you weren’t here on Friday night, you should go online to hear his story. After his mother Angela became a Christian, she began to pray for her son. She prayed passionately in this prayer closet for eight years!

[Show photo of Angela Yuan’s prayer closet]

All the while her son was sinking deeper and deeper into a life of sin – sexual sin, drug addiction, illegal activity. He thought he was enjoying more and more freedom – freedom from restrictive sexual rules, freedom from his parent’s expectations, freedom from “hateful Christians.” But this is the same lie that Satan has used for centuries to lure people into his slavery. The apostle Paul said that before he met Christ he was, “...a slave to the law of sin.” (Rom. 7:25b) But eventually, God answered Angela Yuan’s prayer. She prayed many prayers, but this one she prayed multiple times a day:

“Lord, I will stand in the gap for Christopher. I will stand until the victory is won – until Christopher’s heart changes. I will stand in the gap every day, and there I will fervently pray. And Lord, just one favor. Don’t let me waver. If things get quite rough, which they may, I will never give up on that son, nor will You. Though the enemy seeks to destroy, I will not quit as I intercede, though it may take years... Lord, do whatever it takes to bring this prodigal son to You.”

Christopher eventually went to prison for drug dealing. In prison, his life continued to unravel as his mother prayed. His friends deserted him, he discovered he was HIV positive and he simply had no peace. In desperation, he began to read a bible he found in a trashcan. In his jail cell he finally saw the truth about himself – his rebellion against God was the cause of his pain. He surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. The day he was released from prison, he was accepted at Moody Bible Institute and began his journey to freedom. He is now a Bible professor at Moody.

Who is it that you think is beyond hope? No such person exists. God’s scandalous love always makes the first move and believes people can be changed. Is God calling you to join Him in scandalously loving someone this Christmas? Amen.

ⁱ “News that illustrates for Sunday, Aug. 3 – Aug. 10,” *PreachingToday.com* (The study only mentioned the exception of living in an unhappy place to earn a bigger pay check, but I added ‘people they love’ because of the dozens of people I know personally who are doing just that.)

ⁱⁱ Dr. J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible Commentary, Vol. III* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), p. 623