

Stubborn Idolatry of Israel

You may be seated. Let us turn to our Bibles to Hosea, Hosea chapter four, verses 11 and following. Hosea 11 through 19, chapter four.

Let us listen attentively to the word of God. Harlotry, wine and new wine enslave the heart. My people ask counsel from their wooden idols and their staff informs them.

For the spirit of Harlotry has caused them to stray and they have played the harlot against their God. They offer sacrifices on the mountaintops and burn incense on the hills, under oaks and poplars and timberlands, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters commit Harlotry and your brides commit adultery.

I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry nor your brides when they commit adultery. For the men themselves go apart with harlots and offer sacrifices with their ritual harlots. Therefore people who do not understand will be trampled.

Though you Israel play the harlot, let not Judah offend. Do not come up to Gilgad nor go up to Beth-Aven nor swear an oath saying as the Lord lives. For Israel is stubborn like a stubborn calf.

Now the Lord will let them forage like a lamb in the open country. Ephraim is joined to idols, let him alone. Their drink is rebellion.

They commit harlotry continually. Her rulers dearly love dishonor. The wind has wrapped her up in its wings and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.

Let us go before God in prayer. We ask Lord for your spirit illumination and understanding of this passage to remind us God how serious the sins of idolatry, the capital I, are in the church of the Old Testament. And even today, Lord, it's a serious sin insofar as we ought to flee it.

And here, God, we see that it's doubly worse because they have mixed it with other gross violations of your holy will. Our God and Savior, help us to understand anew and to be strengthened in our desire to follow you and to eschew or to reject all the false worship, especially such gross violations of your first table as we see here, God Almighty. Thanking you, Lord, for your spirit among us that you have collectively purified us more relative to the Old Testament.

Nevertheless, we still have our struggles, God, and may we be humbled thereby. We pray these things for your glorious namesake, amen. In the opening verses of chapter four, we were to go back and read some of these.

The Lord brings charges to the people at large as though it were a law court. In these verses, he calls out on various public sins in particular of the second table there in verses two and three. Though idolatry has been warned about in the prior chapters as well, nothing has changed apparently through the ministry of Hosea and his life.

We don't know when exactly he said these words during his own life, but clearly as time went on, things were not changing. And so the Lord here emphasizes the dangers of idolatry again. And in doing this, the spirit through Hosea delves into details of the stubbornness of this idolatry to bring to the depth of their sins, to highlight these things.

Because to repent particularly means you have to repent of particular sins. You have to know what they are, not just vague ideas. It is both, that is this stubborn idolatry of the Jews at the time, both deep and wide with shocking details.

But as we will find out, such sins are not restricted to the Old Testament era, but still exist today unfortunately. So let's find out more, not for the shock value therein of course, but for the warning of how idolatry can spin out of control as we see here if we let just a little bit in with its foot into the front door of the church.

Details of Idolatry

So the first point here, the details of idolatry verses 11 through 14, we have a description here of two things going on at the same time.

Revelry, right, wine and new wine, enslaving the heart, drunkenness, they're partying. But the partying isn't just plain old pagan partying, which is bad enough. But idolatry, which he calls harlotry.

So he uses again, as he did in the opening chapters of Hosea, the metaphor of the violation of the seventh commandment of the marriage vows with respect to God, this first table of the law, idolatry. That's what's going on here. But we also find out there's actual harlotry going on as well, unfortunately.

And so verse 11 is a summary as I read it here. Harlotry, wine and new wine, enslave the heart. And he continues on to unpack what this idea of the harlotry is.

And behind all that, of course, that is, meanwhile, what's going on here is this revelry and the wine and the new wine, hence the emphasis there in verse 13, for example. They like to be under the trees because of its shade. They're busy having a party and it's a little too hot, you wanna be in the shade is the implication there.

These are debauched parties in which wine enslaves the heart, which is another way of saying they're drunk. They're drunk. Heart here is more or less the mind.

Drunkenness immediately affects that and you can't think straight and you slur and the like. And that's the idea, of course, that affects the rest of the faculties of the heart, as we'll hear about in Sunday school class going over sanctification and the idea of the Hebrew idea of the word heart, which is just all that is internal to you, not just the emotions, of course. And again, harlotry here is the false worship as the remaining verses will highlight here.

Verse 12, my people ask counsel from their wooden idols and their staff informs them. They're talking to dumb idols again. What exactly is going on here? So, I'm not gonna go into

a lot of details, but you need to know the variety, at least, have an idea of the varieties and ways in which they had false worship in the church of the Old Testament.

In here, we have an activity known as rhabdomancy. I probably butchered the name, but it's R-H-A-B-D-O-mancy, right? It's as in necromancy, for example. Necro is death in this case.

This is use of a rod or a stick or the like. That's what we're talking about. He said, they say here, the Holy Spirit says, and their staff or their stick, their rod, informs them.

They're asking questions of their God and they get answers from this idol, in this case, a staff or a rod. In certain ritualistic ways, they would enact the rods and other things as well, thrown on the ground or maybe a collection of sticks to divine God's will for their life. That's what's going on, what we call superstition today, right? Superstition.

Ezekiel 21, 21 describes it along with other pagan methods for divining or figuring out what God has for their life. For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the road, at the fork of the two roads to use divination. He shakes the arrows, and that would fall under this category.

I'm not gonna try to pronounce that word again. That kind of namancy there, necromancy or thismancy here or the stickmancy. And it continues on.

He consults the images. He looks to the liver. That has its own name as well.

They would look at the entrails of dead animals and livers as well, and if it fell out a certain way in a certain direction, it pointed north, it pointed west, it hit the North Star, it pointed at your big toe. It means something significant and it has meaning behind this. You've probably seen this in some movies where you have witches and whatnot and they throw them bones on the ground.

Oh, look, it means something significant. That's what's going on here except with sticks and wood. It's really something how far Israel had fallen from the pure worship of God during the time of Moses and it seems even Solomon for that matter.

So in this case, they probably threw the sticks on the ground or something along the lines, which is to say they're using random chance to determine the will of God. That's what's going on here. Random chance to determine the will of God.

So the divining or, this is the technical term, or determining the will of God for us is only found in two ways. The book of creation and the book of redemption. That's it, not random chance events as such.

And the book of creation, of course, is common sense, our circumstances, which are not random as such, but directed and guided by God's purpose. Providence and, of course, logic, which I guess you could put that as a subset of common sense. The book of redemption, of course, is the Bible telling us his will for our redemption, what it means to be saved, and has much of what's already there in the book of creation in it, especially like the book of Proverbs.

Has lots of common sense stuff that even pagans are like, yeah, that's good stuff, right? Those are the only two forms of finding out God's will for your life. Nothing else. Not visions, not waking up in the middle of the night, not having impressions upon you, and you know my background is charismatic, running into all these kind of things.

And so it's quite fascinating to see how these are similar, although not as crass in the charismatic circles as this. Nevertheless, it's a similar approach to things, trying to divine and figure out God's will outside of the book of creation and the book of redemption. They claim the spirit moved them.

Others say I feel like this is the right path. I'm usually especially sensitive to the word feel. I know sometimes Christians use it and they don't mean it that way.

They mean I think, but they say the word feel, and that's okay. I'm not gonna jump all over you, just so you know, that's kind of my background. I tend to say this is what I think, because there was lots of feelings going on when I grew up.

It was not very helpful that way, unfortunately. And they may be accidentally correct, right? A broken clock is right twice a day. And so their methods may seem to work kind of sort of in their own mind, but they really don't.

God has not given us these random tools, but subtle tools of creation and redemption. Spiritual idolatry here, verses 12 to 13. My people took counsel for the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray.

So here you see more clearly that his idea of harlotry is more along the lines of violations of the first table. The spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray and they have played the harlot against their God, which is right there in the same verse of people taking counsel of wooden idols. Verse 13, they offer sacrifices in the mountaintops.

They burn incense on the hills. That's, he's describing what the harlotry is he's talking about. So it's spiritual harlotry.

It is a violation of the first table, not the seventh per se, but the seventh is there as we're gonna see in verse 14, that it's a violation of the seventh commandment, harlotry itself. So playing the harlotry against God or spiritual harlotry is false worship. Either again, chasing false gods as such and denying one true God, in which case they've thoroughly apostatized or it's mixed and it seems to be the case often in the Old Testament, a mixed worship of the Lord with the pagan methods around them as we see here, taking the sticks and the stones and throwing them down and trying to figure out what the Yahweh's will is for our life, right? They still thought they were the people of the Lord or Jehovah and they swore by his name, in fact, there in verse 15, nor swear an oath saying as what? The Lord, all caps there, that's Jehovah lives.

So these same people committing spiritual harlotry aren't speaking in the name of the Lord, L-O-R-D, right? So it seems to be the case of mixed worship. I'm worshiping the true God,

but just kind of picking all these different methods here because it's much more comfortable. I like it, it seems cool.

Maybe I think it honors God more. Whatever the case is, it's wrong and it's false worship. But at least it isn't outright apostasy in the sense of I don't believe in Jehovah anymore, I don't believe in the God of the Bible anymore.

Who cares about him, I'm gonna follow Baal. No, it seems to be a mixture again of what's going on here. If you recall again, the use of the word Baal, which means master, is actually used to describe God.

God is called Baal. You don't see it in the translations, but it's there. And so that's what I think is going on here.

The sacrifices here on the mountaintops and the hills was a constant problem in Israel, right? The groves and the like. They offer these sacrifices in the name of Baal and whatnot and burn incense on the hills and everywhere else. All throughout, especially Northern Israel, because they had set up, as you recall, in the division of the kingdom, their own way of worshiping God.

Blatant violation of God's commandment. You're supposed to go to the temple, which is in Jerusalem, to do these things. And the Northern tribe said, no, we're gonna do it up here.

We're gonna have our own place. It ends up being places, plural, which were already there before Israel took over Canaan. So they're taking over the old forms of pagan worship and mixing it with God's worship.

This is a manipulation of God's religion. Over time, many stopped going to the Northern tribe location there and took up the pagan worship in the groves and the hills as well. This is syncretism.

It's what's called in theology. A mixture, sin with and among, of course, and mixing it up and the like. The Jews rationalized the worship of Baal, Asherah, and other deities, the method of worship in particular, with Jehovah's honor.

A name written on a broken pot sheared, we have discovered by archeologists, that's like the ancient counterpart of a piece of scrap of paper, from Samaria, Northern Israel, bears the inscription, I'm not gonna read the Hebrew to you, which means either the bull calf of Yahweh or Jehovah, or the bull calf is Jehovah. See that? We're still following Jehovah. Trust us.

Mixed worship. A gross violation of the second commandment. In the case of the goddess Asherah, or Asherah, you probably recall some translations of the Old Testament, right, in the Old Testament there.

There's some graffiti left by the ancient travelers through Northern Sinai, and discovered in 1976, so I'm reading this from the Znanieck Encyclopedia, at the site of, I'm not gonna pronounce that, indicate that some Israelites regarded Asherah to be the wife of Yahweh.

One scrolling reads, quote, I bless you, Jehovah of Samaria, and by Asherah. Or Asherah, depending on your translation.

Yeah, we've dug up their idolatry 3,000 years later. It's incredible. Absolutely incredible.

Now, when I read this one about this false god, goddess being the wife of Yahweh, my first thought was what? Roman Catholic Church. Now, they don't have a wife, they have a mom. It's the relationship, right? There's this marriage relationship, or family relationship in this case, with the mother, Mary, right? They turn Mary's relationship, the earthly mother, into a heinous idol.

They literally bow down to her. When you look it up on Google, as I looked up, it says, I typed in worship of Mary, Roman Catholic Church, and it comes up and says, we don't worship Mary, we venerate her. Potatoes, potatoes, okay? It's the same thing.

You show the special activities and special days, and in fact, they pray to her, brothers and sisters. They pray to her because they believe Jesus, the mediator, is so mean, he needs his mother to soften him up. That's what they teach.

And you read this, you're like, it's like the Old Testament all over again. I don't, even describing it that way, it just really disturbs me. Harlotry, verse 14.

Harlotry. I will not punish your daughters when they commit harlotry, nor your brides when they commit adultery. What is going on here, Pastor? You read this, you're kind of like, huh.

What you have a number of times, it's not uncommon, we've already run across it in Hosea, is elliptical statements. It's implied, what he's getting at. He hasn't said it explicitly.

And the way you express that in writing is often you put a parenthesis and the commentator will put a bracket saying finish the rest of the sentence. What's going on here is this. Not that God is not gonna ever punish the women, because he says over and over again in Hosea, I'm gonna punish you, or I'm gonna bring the pagans upon you.

It's gonna happen. What he's saying here is I'm not gonna only punish them, as though they're the only culprits, because you read in the rest of verse 14, for, he says for, let me explain to you what's going on here. Here's the reason.

For the men themselves go apart with harlots. You think you're gonna get away with it, guys? And only the women are gonna get punished? Oh no. That's not the case at all.

That's what he's saying. That's what's going on in these verses. And so God describes the wicked activities of the men as well.

They offered false sacrifices at false shrines under false pretenses to get harlots, or women of the night. Pagan worship often violated both tables of the law, like we saw in verse 11, where they were being drunk. It was mixed with religious practices.

Here it's breaking of the seventh commandment mixed with the breaking of the second commandment. If you have often little care and respect for God and his honor, you're gonna have little care and respect for mankind. That's what this reminds us of.

Specifically, as we have in this helpful translation, verse 14, and offer sacrifices with a ritual harlot. With a ritual harlot. The Hebrew word there is actually the feminine noun for holy.

The Hebrew uses what they call roots in the same consonant, three consonants, with a feminine ending, because the idea here is this. The pagans have an idea of holy because they're made in God's image, but it's fallen, and their holiness is wicked holiness. In this case, a female, well, it's written under the ritual harlot.

She's holy unto their goddess with this holy office. That's what the idea there is. And it's quite fascinating, because it reminds us again how the world twists truth and beauty and merit itself, as here in the case of harlotry, or prostitution.

Ritual harlots were not uncommon back then, but quite common. Not separated unto God, but unto wicked pagan temple practices and the like. Now, again, there are two types of harlotry going on in the text.

Spiritual harlotry, verse 11 and elsewhere, and here, literal harlotry at the same time. They have spiritualized sin. And therefore, it's a double offense before God.

It is an expression, therefore, of what? In verse 15 and following, especially verse 16. A stubborn idolatry. They have planted their heels in, and they've gotten worse and worse as the generations went by.

As we saw in the prior chapters there, it mentions the fathers and the mothers of the prior generations, and how their idolatry unfolded into worse idolatry as time goes on. It makes an effect upon the children and the grandchildren, brothers and sisters. That's why we must be very careful about what is allowed in the worship and in the doctrine of God.

Stubborn Idolatry

That, too, of course, is part of the first table of the law, what we believe of him. Stubborn idolatry, the second point, verses 15 through 19. The warning here in verse 15, not obviously clear at times, but hopefully you see here.

Though you Israel, by Israel he means the northern tribes. That's often the case after the split. And you can see that because he talks about Judah.

That's not the northern tribes. That's not, it's a part of Israel, that Israel often means the 10 tribes, and Judah means Judah slash Benjamin. Let not Judah offend, although Israel play the harlot.

That's what he's saying. Don't follow after the northern tribes' way of doing things. They have their own problem, of course.

You know, Judah is also violating the second table, but at least they have the temple. At least they have the real priesthood, and not a made-up priesthood, as the northern tribes did. And he's saying, don't imitate them.

Don't go down their path. That's what he's warning them about here. Judah, do not offend.

That is, do not offend, dot, dot, dot, the way Israel is offending, and the harlotry that they have done of both types. And he continues here. Do not go up to Beth-Aven, or up to Gilgal.

Now, Gilgal is, of course, up north there, and up to Beth-Aven. Beth-Aven is a play on words. Your, I think a typical Bible may have a little commentary there to show that to you.

It's a play on words. It's about Bethel, the town of Bethel. 1 Kings 12, 32, we read, and Jeroboam ordained a feast in the eighth month and the 15th day of the month, like unto the feast that is in Judah.

And he offered upon the altar. So did he at Bethel, sacrificing unto the calves that he had made, and he placed in Bethel the priest of the high places which he had made. He created a whole new religion, like they did in England, in the Anglican church.

They split off from Roman Catholic churches, and we're gonna just make our own church now. Here we go. They did the same thing.

The northern tribes, Jeroboam, he grabs from amongst the 10 tribes his own priesthood, sets them up in Bethel, and they start doing their own sacrifices in gross violation of the law of God, which says you're supposed to be in the temple, and we know the temple is there in Jerusalem. It's a black letter commandment. It's not like you gotta guess or infer about this stuff.

It was his way of keeping the northern tribes away from going to the south. It was a bad way of mixing politics and religion. All the men have to, once a year, go down to the sacrifices, and they're gonna leave the northern tribes and go to the southern tribes.

That's not gonna help the northern leadership. The king, Jeroboam, he's like, I want you staying here. Your heart's gonna be wrapped around the wrong people.

I want your heart wrapped around my finger. The way he did that was he manipulated religion to his advantage. That's what's going on here.

The play on words is this. Beth of En literally means house of iniquity, or perhaps house of an idol. It's a derogatory byword for Bethel that was perhaps coined by Amos himself in 5.5, chapter five, verse five.

So, Hosea's not playing nice with false worship. We have found the location of this place, but, quote, no remains have been found at Bethel of the infamous shrine that Jeroboam I built as a rival to the Jerusalem temple, but we know the place is there. Poni is used again in these verses and continuing on playing the harlot for the spiritual unfaithfulness with respect to the first table of the law.

And again, it's a strong word about describing the infraction of the northern tribes and their stubbornness in verses 16 to 18 is highlighted explicitly. For Israel is stubborn. She won't turn around.

She's insistent upon doing these wicked practices, wicked sacrifices in the name of the Lord. Like a wayward calf fleeing her master. Animals can be very stubborn.

We forget about that sometimes because we have our own animals in our house and cats and dogs we find kind of cute and like, but not if you're a farmer trying to deal with these 300 pound animals. You don't want them being stubborn. It's hard, it's difficult in life.

And he's describing this difficulty that they have against God, who is the master of the field and master of all the animals, and they keep pushing against him and rejecting him and joining unto idols. The rebellion is so prevalent here that he describes in the following verses of 17 through 19 what this rebellion looks like. It's a repetition of continuous problem of the church of the Old Testament over and over again.

Not just Hosea, Amos, Ezekiel, Jeremiah. This hammer, this point, home, what are you doing? Worshiping God and pretending he's Baal while worshiping him with Baal methodology and the like and false worship. They drink rebellion like drunks drink alcohol, we read here.

They drink, their drink is rebellion. Verse 18, Jesus tells his disciples, the will of my Father is meat for me. It's like food to my soul.

Here, food to their soul is rebellion. That's a terrible description to describe and to find yourself at the other end of this text as they were. Instead of the word of God being their meat and drink, it is rebellion, misdeeds and the like, like it's second nature to them.

Spiritual unfaithfulness is a nonstop mode. There's no breaks. It just goes and goes and goes and gets worse and worse and worse.

It gets so bad. Well, we're reading through Ezekiel and I forgot Ezekiel brought this up because I know Jeremiah does. Ezekiel describes the unfaithfulness, first table of the law, towards Jehovah in sacrificing their kids on the altar, killing their sons and daughters on an altar like they're just another beast.

And God says, I'm gonna come after you. I'm gonna punish you. I'm gonna tear down this city because of this.

And God there, yes, in Hosea, you can see it's on its way there, don't you? One step, one generation after another and the stubbornness grows day in and day out. Rebellion is like chaos. In verse 19, the wind has wrapped her up in its wings, that is Israel, the northern tribes, and they shall be ashamed because their sacrifices.

They're caught up in the chaos of idolatry and under its influence and all the varieties of sins that they run into. And God's judgment will bring them shame. For what? Because of their sacrifices.

Because of their false sacrifices. Because they're pretending to worship the true God in his way when it's really not his way and it may not even be the true God often in their hearts, although it is on their lips. The Lord is serious about his honor and they are not serious about his honor.

And that leads us to a warning today that continues for application. Watering down of the first table of the law, of course, is a sin and there are degrees of sin and violations, as we know, and that's true in the first table of the law as well, in the second commandment in particular. Some violations of the second commandment are not as bad as others.

Certainly praying to the dead, praying to Mary, is one of the grossest forms therein of the second table, violations of it, and surely a greater sin than other violations. Other violations today are things like turning everyday things into worship. We've talked about this before.

I have my special cup here and I honor God with it. Please don't touch my special cup. It has special holy water in it or something like that.

The Roman Catholic Church literally has holy water. That's blessed by the priest. That's superstitious.

That's saying something in the ordinary life has some special religious signification before God and we gotta act accordingly to it. It's holy unto the Lord. That's a violation of the second table, of the second commandment, but that's not as bad as worshiping Mary, okay? There are degrees, is my point, because we have this problem in the American church and here are some examples.

Besides the obvious example, like turning worship into entertainment, that's not holy unto the Lord. That's holy unto you. That's gratifying your flesh.

We're not here to have fun, brothers and sisters, in that sense. We're here to enjoy God and his presence, to learn more about him and to worship him in spirit for he is a God who is spirit. Others, however, continue in a different direction.

They've had a Seder meal, S-E-D-E-R, I think it is, or A-R, which is a Jewish Passover feast. It's the modern Jewish Passover feast, right? It may not be exactly what they did during the time of Jesus. I don't believe it is at all.

In some regards, very similar. But these are Protestant churches during the week of Easter. I've seen the advertisement in a sister denomination having a Seder meal.

You're like, what are you, what, why? What is, I don't understand. Why, brothers and sisters, why would you ever do this? All that stuff is done away with. It might be historically curious, but I tell you, it's no accident it was during the week of Easter, because that's what the Passover was, I guess, with the Jews or something like that.

It's no accident. Others, I've seen this, I remember seeing this a number of years ago. My wife reminded of this, of me again.

She saw it as well, I think, on social media. Was it Ash Wednesday? I don't follow these things. They're made up, man-made traditions.

Protestants, again, having their pastor come up to them and put ash on their forehead. You're like, why don't you just go join the Roman Catholic Church? Why play games? I don't understand. Be honest with yourself and with one another.

That's not as bad, I know, as worshiping Mary. I grant that. But it's still a violation of the second table, the second commandment, the first table.

Nevertheless, brothers and sisters, let us examine ourselves, that we not mime or imitate the forms of public worship outwardly and not with our heart. But inwardly love the Lord and desire his will for us, that we be satisfied with simple and unadorned worship. We don't need fancy things to excite us.

That's the point of Jesus when he talked to the woman at the well. They have this big argument between her and the Samaritan. She's a Samaritan, and they're down south.

Where's the real worship? Is it in Jerusalem? Is it in Bethel? Jesus said, the time is coming when they will worship me in spirit and in truth, because it's not about the outward forms of the temple, of the priest, of the altar, of the lampstand, of the shovels, as we read there in 1 Kings, right? Descriptions of all the details of the elements. There was a holy shovel, it was a holy altar. None of that.

The outward forms are no longer emphasized as much. It's simply reduced to what? Preaching, which is an outward form. Never thought about that when I'm verbally saying things and using my hand and my body, my mouth especially.

Lord's Supper and baptism. Everything else is natural worship that we do intuitively, bowing our head, standing up, or something like that, but nothing elaborate like a cross. You're not gonna find that in nature.

You're certainly not gonna find that in the Bible. Flashy and distracting is what those things are, and those are one of the biggest arguments, consistent problem the Reformers had with the Roman Catholic Church, as I've gone through a number of historical documents going over the history of singing songs before God. That's their biggest concern.

A lot of the songs were in Latin, for example. Oops. Can't edify the people and God in that regard.

In other words, may we focus more on Him and who He is and what He's done for us on His day, and in fact, every Lord's day, in proper and good worship. Let us pray. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, help us to pray God Almighty that you'd be humble in your sight, to be thankful

what you've instructed and informed us, Lord, and you've given us the conviction to follow you with simple, unadorned worship.

Gracious God, may your spirit continue to be upon us, Lord. May you help us to speak to those who are confused in these matters, who wish to bring in other things that they think are holy before you, somehow special and makes them feel good, or whatever the reason is, and that we would have a proper understanding and patience with them, Lord, but nevertheless have a strength and conviction to stand upon your word, we pray. By the blood of Christ, our Lord and Savior, amen.