

God's Love Is Greater than Backsliding

Let us turn to our Bibles, to Hosea chapter 11. Hosea chapter 11, verses 7 and 8, Hosea 11, verses 7 and 8. Let us listen attentively to the word of God. My people are bent on backsliding from me.

Though they call to the Most High, none at all exalt Him. How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Adma? How can I set you like Zeboim? My heart churns within me. My sympathy is stirred.

Let us pray. With these amazing words of love, God, in stark contrast to the outward apostasy and backsliding of the people of God, and the northern tribes in particular, Lord, who call out your name, at least ostensibly and outwardly, but none of them exalt you. They're not following you with their whole heart.

So, God, we ask that we would see through this. In spite of the great backsliding of Israel, your love was even greater. And may this, I pray, encourage and strengthen us as we struggle with our sins, that you will love us and have loved us with a greater love than ever we have sinned.

We ask these things by the blood of our Lord and Savior. Amen. In the midst of many denunciations of Israel by Hosea, the prophet, through these now 11 chapters, we come across some stark contrasts now and then.

Here, a very stark contrast. These two verses highlight the experience of the Old Testament church at this time, one of rank wickedness and backsliding. Yet the next sentence we read of the Lord's breathtaking sympathy in spite of that.

We are here reading a description of widespread faithlessness and rebellion throughout the book of Hosea. Here in these chapters as well. Against the Most High and that from His own people, those whom He brought up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

What we are to expect, of course, but more judgment and punishment, for God has promised that throughout the book of Hosea. You've done this. I'm going to do this.

You keep doing that. I'm going to keep doing this. I'm going to bring the Assyrian Empire, especially, in particular, in the fall of Samaria in 722, the northern capital of the Jews of the north.

But here instead we read that God shows love and compassion for them. How can I give you up? Ephraim, one of the main tribes of the north, representing all of Israel. And he says at the end, my heart churns within me.

Churns with what? It churns with sympathy. It's stirred up towards these who have no sympathy towards God, their Father. So let us dwell upon this glorious truth of God's love being greater than their backsliding, than our backsliding, perhaps, if we have had these or we've seen these, and certainly in the lives of those near us. First by understanding the

danger and the sin of backsliding, and then lastly by meditating upon Christ's mercy and love for us.

Backsliding Is a Great Sin

So the first point, the backsliding is a danger and a sin for all of us in the church especially. The text here is Israel's backsliding, verse 7, and a little bit before, of course.

They're turning away from their covenant obligations. My people are bent, not just their backsliding, it's occasional, but it seems like their nature, as he describes elsewhere, as a stubborn ox. And even as a stubborn ox, I drew you with gentle chords, we read in verse 4, with bands of love.

In spite of that, they had, in other words, unrepentant hearts. No praise and honor of the Lord. They call upon God, but none what exalt Him.

So clearly that calling upon God is not a sincere calling upon God. It's superficial, it's hypocritical perhaps. Something is wrong, because as we know, they've been worshiping Baal.

And they had their holy days in the northern tribes, their own made-up holy days by Jeroboam. They had their own parallel religious system. Clearly not a sign of exalting God by doing their own thing.

Quite the opposite. Describes, in other words, this being bent upon backsliding from me, the sum total of their wicked worship and life over the many years, yes, even the many decades. For their fall in 722, during the time of Hosea, has been building up since the rebellion from generation after generation.

They follow in the footsteps of their fathers, their forefathers, their grandfathers, their great grandfathers. So it wasn't just acts here and there, falling into sin, committing maybe some high heinous sin, but then repenting and turning around like, I don't know, David, King David. But clearly it was what we describe as a lifestyle, a way of living for them.

Backsliding is mentioned in other books of the Old Testament, especially Jeremiah who writes about it in chapter 3 where we read, Then I saw that for all the causes for which backsliding Israel had committed adultery, I put her away and given her a certificate of divorce. Of course, he means the spiritual adultery, the spiritual certificate of divorce, that is their violation, the gross violation of the covenant. Yet her treacherous sister Judah did not fear but went and played the harlot also.

Because as we know, Judah tries to catch up with false worship as well. And this shows us, in other words, that it's not just the theme of Hosea, but other prophets bring this up. It's a common moral failing of the northern tribes, especially but not uniquely.

Hosea mentions it again, and we'll get there in a few more chapters, chapter 14, where we have another contrast as well of backsliding, but also a picture of hope. Hosea 14.4, we

read, I will heal their backsliding. I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from him.

So he acknowledges again their disobedience to him, and yet he loves them anyway. A wonderful, wonderful picture. Now, backsliding doesn't mean they will never ever repent.

It just means they haven't been repenting. And we know this because the promise revival in verse 10 and 11 here, that God will call them up, that when he roars his sons will come trembling from the west, and that he will not give them terror forever, but they shall come to the land and out of the land, and they will dwell in their houses, says the Lord, verse 11, because God will bring them back peacefully, that is, his people, because of his love, in spite of their backsliding. Now, let's dig in a little bit into backsliding, defining it, showing its characteristics and some of the roots of why one would backslide.

As I mentioned this morning, don't just wake up one day and start backsliding. That's not typically the case. Now, you can dig in, if you wish, into a Meteor book on this matter by John Owen on apostasy.

You can find that online. So, backsliding defined as turning away from Christ in the path of godliness, that is, turning away, another way of describing backsliding, so clearly the imagery is of walking and traveling down the correct path of holiness, the straight way, right, the orthodoxy. This path of godliness is twofold, of course, both in practice and in doctrine.

So, one turning away from Christ in the path of godliness happens usually from both places, but sometimes from one, both in doctrine and in practice. Practice, that is, how they live, and they would live an open, blatant sin without a care in the world, not caring about being members of the church, for example, throwing it all away. And, of course, doctrine, denouncing Christ, His Word, or the resurrection, as we heard this morning in 2 Timothy chapter 2. Often the two go hand in hand.

There are different types of backsliding, so that's a very broad definition. I will narrow it down a little bit later. Different types of backsliding.

I'm narrowing it down right now, excuse me. Different types of backsliding. Two ways of talking about it.

One is a total backsliding or a total apostasy, that is, intentionally and maliciously turning away from Christ in the path of godliness. Not just sinning now and then throughout one's life, as I gave the example of David, but a renunciation of the gospel way. I want nothing to do with Christ and His Word and His truth and His gospel.

Rejecting one's baptism is a perfect example of that. Saying it out loud, of course, I don't care about my baptism. I'm throwing it away.

I'm throwing Christ away. I want nothing to do with any of this. That would be described as a total apostasy.

And this is significant. Since you realize there's going to be a different type of apostasy next, or backsliding, it makes all the difference in the world. Because sometimes Christians can be a little confused.

They say, that guy's apostatized. And perhaps in their mind when they use that word, that means it's total. It's over.

It's never coming back. They've renounced Christ and they're never going to see a change ever again. And unfortunately that happens more often than we like.

But that's not always the case. You can partially apostatize. That's the next description.

That is pretty much anything short of totally renouncing Christ, your baptism, the church, the gospel, all that. John Owen describes it this way. When any important principle of evangelical truth is forsaken and renounced, especially when many of them are so, that is a cluster of them, when the rule of obedience which the gospel prescribes is habitually neglected, when men believe otherwise than what is taught and live otherwise than is required, there is a partial apostasy from it, from the evangelical truths of the Bible.

So the way I put it is everything short of total apostasy. A little here, a little there, maybe a lot here, a little less there. Something that's certainly worrisome for the rest of us is obvious.

What is going on here? Why are you going this direction in your life? But you were a Christian. There you have a partial backsliding or apostasy, and of course that should still be a warning. The warning bell should go off in concern because they may already be totally apostate, but they're certainly on the route towards it, and that's dangerous enough.

There's different ways of describing apostasy and elements therein, and I'm not going to get into all that, but I do want to give a little bit of an anatomy here from the well-known passage, I believe, for all of us in Hebrews chapter 6. Hebrews chapter 6, 4 and following you may recall, we read the following, at least part of it. I'm not going to go through all of that chapter. We read, "...of those who were once enlightened, have tasted the heavenly gift, have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." And he continues on to describe them as basically being almost impossible for them to ever be saved again for they crucify Christ anew, in shorthand there.

And you can read this description and say, well, that's me. I've tasted things, and I've become partaker of the Holy Spirit, right? Haven't we all been partakers of the Holy Spirit? And we have tasted the good word of God. We hear preaching, we read the Bible.

But the author didn't think that description was final, of course. The description, in other words, was necessary but not sufficient to describe someone who has apostatized, that we can all share these things, but they go further and we do not, or we have other characteristics that they do not have, for example. Because the author of Hebrews, in these elements, yes, we all have this tasting, but even more than tasting.

Yes, we have the Holy Spirit, but more than simply partaking, He indwells in us. Because the next verse right after what I just read is verse 9, So yes, you have this description, and we can fit some of that insofar as we have the Spirit, we have the Word of God, but the description further is tasting, not eating. It's a different word, just like in English.

The word is taste. I think I hate this. I think I want nothing to do with Jesus Christ and the baptism.

I want none of this. It's not good for me. And it's used there and elsewhere as tasted.

So, we have better things, things that accompany salvation, he says. A public confession, of course, a perseverance given to us by the Spirit of God, a love of Christ and the everything else, an indwelling of the Holy Spirit, partaking of the Spirit, not the same thing as having the Spirit. And a good example of that, of course, is Acts 6, as I mentioned in another sermon, where he's like, well, teach me this special gift.

I'll give you money so I can also give the gift of the Holy Spirit to other people. And Peter said, what? Depart from me. You and your money be cast away.

What are you saying? You're not much of a Christian. What's going on here? To him, it was just this. He tasted a little bit of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God, but he did not digest it and eat it and have the Spirit himself.

And so, these New Testament members of the church who fall away, as we saw in 2 Timothy, for example, experience similar things as believers, at least outwardly. Because if you're going to eat the flesh of Christ, that is, believe and feed upon His Word, you got to taste it. And then you go beyond tasting to eating, don't you? So you're always going to have that, as it were, the first step.

They only made the first step, and that's as far as they went. They wanted nothing to do with Christianity. Owen believes, and I agree with him, whatever that means.

You want to listen to Owen probably, but Hebrews 6 describes total apostasy, not partial apostasy or partial backsliding. Clearly, there's a partial backsliding going on here because God says, I grieve for you, I love you, I'm going to call you back. How can you call Him back if it's a total apostatizing? In the sense of finally not being elect but reprobates, right? So, it can happen.

People have a partial falling away. It may last for a long time. It could be quite scary if it's a family member.

Owen, he describes it this way, there is a goodness and excellency in this heavenly gift, which may be tasted or experienced in some measure by such as never received them in their life, in their power, and their efficacy. The fullness, we would say. They may taste of the Word, in its truth, but not its power.

Of the worship of the church in its outward order, but not in its inward beauty. Of the gifts of the church, but not in its internal graces. That's all the difference in the world.

This apostasy is not the individual sin of the believer, individual sins, a collection of sins that we have, because we do have them, we struggle. Remember, he murdered and adultery. But he repented.

He eventually repented. It took a little time, but it happened. Rather, apostasy is complete rejection of God's grace.

They want none of it. Remember King Saul? He went to the witch of Endor because he cared not for the grace of God by this time in his life. David repented.

Saul hardened his heart. That's the difference. Hebrew 6 is about total apostasy.

Owen, again, he continues, they did it by declaring that having made trial of him, that is the apostate, the full apostasy, they made trial, they tested, they tasted the gospel in Jesus Christ. They made trial of him, his gospel, his ways. They found nothing of substance, truth or goodness in them, for which they should continue their profession.

I don't want to go any further. What's the point of this? Thus, that famous or infamous apostate, Julian the Emperor, in Sunday school class, gave this as his motto in his apostasy. I have read, known, and condemned your gospel.

And everyone's like, okay, obviously you're an apostate. And it hath been this way of apostates in all ages, end quote. That's a big difference.

That's a very big difference. Backsliding a little here, a little there. I say a little not to belittle backsliding, but as opposed to total.

This fell off the cliff, right? Jumped off the cliff. It's not a passive act. Falling off the cliff is passive in the language there, right? They jumped off.

Julian the Apostate raised Christian with some of the founding fathers of the early church, as you recall, in the 300s, and he's like, I've read, I've known, and I've condemned your gospel. And he wanted to bring on full paganism in the Roman Empire in the mid 300s. Now there's different causes of backsliding.

Imagine as many ways one sins as those are all the ways that could be a path towards total apostasy. But I think broadly we can talk about some common themes, I think, enough to be aware of these things internally and externally. So internally, the most obvious part, that's where it begins.

What are you doing with your heart? Do you believe in Jesus or just all talk with your lips, right? Hatred of Christ in the church, for whatever reason, is one clear cause for apostasy, certainly total apostasy. Wanting nothing to do with Him, not of indifference, but outright hatred and maliciousness. Pride is another cause of backsliding, self-sufficiency, look how good I am, what do I really need of Christ? So in the case of partial backsliding, it would be, why do I need to do this or that, or go to church and participate with the saints? I've got the Bible, I'm good enough for these things.

Oh brother, that's a dangerous path to go down, we would tell him. I wouldn't say he's totally apostatizing, but he's in that partial path right there, and it's certainly out of pride. I don't need the church, I don't need one another, I don't need you, I don't need preaching, whatever the case is.

Self-righteousness, so it's pretty close to the idea of self-sufficiency and pride, of course, but more specific, like the Pharisees, I'm good enough to go to heaven, or to add to the merits of Christ Jesus, as the Roman Catholic Church teaches. Acts of supererogation they're called, super, above and beyond. Really, you think you can do better? What? That's crazy.

Love of the world is another cause for backsliding. Too many people today, I think, than I can count, certainly fall into this trap. Again, these could all overlap with one another in the same person.

The idea of loving the world is loving the prosperity, the peace, the good things, the good parts of life, here and now, or the bad parts, I mean the use of this world, of the things of this world, clothing, cars, money, whatever, prestige, it doesn't have to be something concrete, it could be abstract that way, and you use it for sin, for your own selfish desires. They love the world, and the praises of the world, and the good things of the world, and they don't want to separate from it. They don't want to control it.

They don't want to be set aside, like the church tells them, to control themselves, and say no to running off and doing whatever you feel like all the time. That's why God puts limits upon our desires, like Sunday is one limit therein, and others of His Ten Commandments, and of course, a combination of all these things, and perhaps even more. Now, what do I mean by external? That's the internal, those internal drives, and desires, or sins, and lusts that come out of control, and control a man, and drive him to run away from the church, but often they're accompanied by something external as well.

Now, I'm not going to say it's an excuse, it's not an excuse for what they do, but I wrote an introduction to a new book recently coming out on gluttony. I mentioned this in January in our congregational meeting. It's a collection of sermons and commentary selections.

I'm not writing it, I'm writing the introduction. This is the same publisher who's published other books, and so it's a collection of sermons and commentaries from the church fathers on the sin of gluttony, large sections, and in reading it, I was reminded of how prosperity and good living can be what? An occasion to lull our spirits to sleep into overindulgence and excess in this life, such as the excess of overeating is but one excess of loving the world. And same with backsliding.

A comfortable life may be used as an excuse not to take God seriously, because what? One thing is there's no immediate effects for not taking God seriously in our culture in many ways. Go to church, eh, nothing bad is gonna happen to me. Curse, eh, everyone else curses, no one cares.

Do this sin, do that sin, nothing's gonna happen to me. In fact, we celebrate some of these sins. They make laws to excuse these sins, like breaking of marriages, for example.

So the consequences aren't immediate. On top of the fact that we have such a comfortable life, that you just kind of, oh, this is really nice, I can have my cake and eat it too. And eventually they realize I can't keep doing that in the church, and so they throw the church away because they'd rather keep eating the cake, instead of saying, Lord, I'd rather just fast and be holy.

Often, often it's gradual over time, but it can be sudden, at least with respect to us. We just see it, we're like, where'd that come from? Often because we don't live with them, frankly. We just, we just don't know the story.

We don't know what's been going on in their hearts, what things they've been doing on the off hours, as it were, throughout the week. Even in your own family sometimes, if it's an adult especially, with kids you would, you will know one way or the other, I suppose. But yeah, but again, the conditions of backsliding here, that is other things, external as well, neglect of the means of grace, prayer, church, Bible, just not doing these things brings you closer and closer to apostasy or backsliding of some sort.

Fleeing the company of believers is another example of this, not being with the saints, because we're called to what? Acknowledge and encourage to be a positive influence, positive peer pressure is a thing, we ought to believe in that and reinforce that with one another. And those who backslide don't like that, they get uncomfortable and they leave the church. That's one thing they do, or one reason why.

And avoiding repentance, instead of repenting as quick as possible, you put it off, that lets your faith wither away a little further and that's yet another condition of backsliding. Now our backsliders, backsliding Christians, because that's what you're talking about, it has to be somebody already has something, at least professedly, outwardly, and they throw it away, that is the church and their baptism. Are they without hope? Clearly verse 8 says they're not without hope, how can I give you up Ephraim or hand you over Israel? God doesn't give up on them and we shouldn't give up on them.

We witness people leaving the church and Christ behind and certainly sad to see, and we've had even church discipline to that extent. But it's not hopeless, it is never hopeless. I try to encourage people as long as somebody's breathing, there's hope.

They haven't passed into eternity yet and you can pray and perhaps you can talk to them, although we know sometimes you can't, especially family members, it becomes very hard.

God's Love is Greater than Backsliding

And this leads us to the second point, God's love is greater than backsliding, than the sin of backsliding. Verse 8, the sympathy of our Heavenly Father here, such wonderful words and such loving care, my heart churns within me, my sympathy is stirred up.

Those are amazing words for people who spat in His face. That's what they're doing when they're worshiping Baal of all people, or Moloch and offer their children on the altar and

burn them alive. And it's a personal message, how can I give you up Ephraim, how can I hand you over Israel, that is hand you over to Assyria as we know.

It's like a broken hearted father to a stubborn rebellious child. What have you done, what can I do to draw you back to me with bands of love, with cords of compassion? So you who struggle with assurance, these words. Often of course we have lots of beautiful other passages in the Bible, New Testament for example, because the revelation is much clearer in many ways, but this is a beautiful one here, how can I give you up Ephraim, he's speaking to the church, not to Jews as Jews, a biological entity, but as a spiritual entity, the body of the Old Testament.

How can I make you like these cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, they're related to Sodom and Gomorrah, my heart turns within me and he has sympathy and love for his people. And so these words here, if true for the rebellious stiff-necked Jews of old, generation after generation, how much more are they true for us? The restraint of our Lord here in verse 9, I will not execute the fiercest of my wrath and the like, we went over that last week, and it's basically describing that he will execute punishment, but not the fullness of his punishment, because the capital of Samaria will fall, and he says, I am God and not a man, and thus I will not bring terror upon you. So this is a picture of God's great love in this verse and the next few verses as well, the revival promise, and drawing them back in a picture of the New Testament era in fact, that we are brought into great blessing of his love for his people.

God's love here I want to describe and get into its greatness as over and against the sin of backsliding in a three-fold manner. The first part is God's love for the world. What do I mean by this? That is, God's care and compassion as the Father Creator of all things.

Christ tells us what? The rain falls upon the just and the unjust alike. That's the kind of love I mean. I have to use that with a description there and not conflate it with redemptive love, that could be confusion, that's why I often like to use the word care or God's concern in that sense, and he does.

It's him as our Creator showing continual care even for those who hate them. Those who hate them, even total apostates, have what? Like in America for example, great blessings, wonderful blessings, more blessings than we have sometimes, and we know that comes from God himself, it wasn't an accident, and so in that sense he has a care for them or a love, but we know that that's there to bring them to repentance as Romans 2. The goodness of God and his long suffering, even the goodness in giving them material blessings in this world is to show them that they need to acknowledge him as Lord and repent of their sins because they don't deserve any of it. Secondly, God's love for the church, the church as an institution, those baptized, that is outwardly representing the body of Christ from child to adult alike, God's care for them as well, whether wheat or tares, we see over and over again in the Old Testament, even up to this point, the fact that Hosea is sent and other prophets, Elisha and Ezekiel and the like are sent to them because God hasn't given up on them yet, I speak as a man.

God is still working on them, they're not fully punished yet, they haven't fallen yet in this text to the Assyrian army in which the ten northern tribes are completely obliterated, we

don't hear any more about them and they're all gone. They're not here anymore, they're not there, and they weren't there at the time of Christ. And so God has a care for them, this outward church, the Old Testament, and we have the same in the New Testament era to this day, when people in the church who are not saved, but they are still with us, I'm glad, it's better to be here than outside the church, think about it, they at least get the truth, they get the care of the church, both spiritual care and physical care, like the diaconate, and that's because of God.

God cares for them, wheat or tares, and it's a different kind of care He gives than to the world, for it is the church as an institution that we have baptism, we have the preaching and teaching of the Word, we have public worship and honor of God in Christ, the prayer and praises of His saints, all of which can, what, be used by the Spirit of God to soften hearts. I suppose because sin is so strong in this world, because we are in a fallen world, we're not in heaven yet, and we read so much of the Old Testament here through 1st and 2nd Kings, right, one king after another, what's with these kings, they're just falling over left and right, they're so wicked, and here the people of God and Hosea and elsewhere, as I went through other minor prophets, you just read sin after sin after sin, like what's going on here, but we forget on the flip side that they are in the church of God, they've been circumcised, God sends the prophets to them and not to the Egyptians and not to the Syrians, to them, and He says, you're my people, I brought you out of Egypt, there's something special going on here, and so the means that we have in the church can be used to bring regeneration, conviction alike, by being in the church, even if they were born unbelievers and they stayed unbelievers for 10 or 20 years, but they're still in the church, it's still the things that God can use and has used, I believe, in the Bible and the Old Testament and here in the New Testament era to bring people to conversion, which is more than they'll ever get by not being in the church. So as much as one of the concerns that we have is, oh no, we don't want to have hypocrites in the church, yeah, well, I'm sorry, you're always gonna have hypocrites, there's just no way around it, because you're always gonna have hypocrites amongst humans, it's a human condition, so we shouldn't be overly bothered in that sense, but just be thankful that we want to bring more people into the church, it's a positive influence to be instructed in the Word of God, why wouldn't we want to give more people the opportunity, why would I want to cut that off at the knees? So let's not lose sight of that.

And then, of course, the third one, I think you know, is God's love for the elect, the wheat in particular. They may not be in the church, right, some of God's elect may not be in the visible church, depending on because of war or something like that, something terrible happened or whatever the case is, and that's the greatest of His love, love proper, perhaps we should say, redemptive love, wherein heaven and earth are moved for your salvation, brothers and sisters. And Hosea 14.4, again, is that passage I mentioned prior, I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, for my anger has turned away from him.

Here he is speaking in 7 and 8 here, to the people collectively, wheat and tares, indistinguishable, Hosea doesn't know the difference. And there's a kind of a love, a corporate love for them that God has clearly described here. But not all of them will be ultimately elect and redeemed, as we know.

Not all Israel is Israel, Romans 2. And so here, within these promises of revival, bringing them back to the land, each one has their own house, that is a picture of prosperity and of peace, peace in the Redeemer, Jesus Christ especially, and the new house of the kingdom of God in the New Testament era, that the Lord has these promises uniquely for the elect. They will always have these things, one way or the other. They will be regenerated, they will be justified, they will be sanctified, regardless of what their external conditions may be, which is a glory and a praise.

And so those who are backsliding and backslidden, people near you, brothers and sisters, we read a whole generation, multiple generations here, and God says, I'm still going to love you, I'm still going to heal you in spite of your wretchedness, because my love is greater than your backsliding. Never forget that. Never forget that, I pray.

Let us indeed pray to God above. Amen. Lord, we ask that we would be strengthened and encouraged.

As long as we breathe, as long as those around us breathe, there is still hope, for the Lord has mercy upon the backsliding of stubborn Jews and has mercy upon the backsliding of stubborn Christians today, God, for all of us. And may this, I ask God, Your Spirit, move us to continued love, amazement, and, Lord, a growth in faith in You. We pray by the blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen.