

As The Lord Loves Us

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If God had wanted empty obedience, He could have asked for it. In the same way that a marriage between a husband and wife can sometimes become nothing but rule-keeping, the marriage between God and His people can lose its vitality – the difference is that while two humans both bear responsibility for the failure of their relationship, it will never be God who makes the first move away from true love. Consider the heartrending, powerful story of Hosea the prophet:

- He is asked to find a “wife of harlotry” (Hosea 1:2), a woman named Gomer, and have children with her. The reason for such a strange command becomes clear as the prophet discovers Gomer has difficulty avoiding the life of harlotry that brought her so much attention and pleasure (2:5-7).
- Gomer is Israel to God. He had taken her from among the nations and made her strong. Israel had every blessing it could have imagined – not the least of which was a relationship with the Almighty, who deeply, unselfishly loved His people.
- Along the way, something changed in Israel’s collective heart. They sought idols and the customs of the heathen nations. They tried to integrate profanity into their worship. They indulged in the flesh flagrantly.
- Hosea is now asked to seek Gomer, to bring her back from her life of sin. But not in wrath or bitterness! *“Go again, love a woman who is loved by her husband, yet an adulteress, even as the Lord loves the sons of Israel... Afterward the sons of Israel will return to seek the Lord their God and David their king; and they will come trembling to the Lord and His goodness in the last days”* (Hosea 3:1,5).

This is not the only time in the Old Testament that God uses the husband/wife relationship to describe His love for Israel (Isaiah 62:4-5; 54:5-6 says, *“Your husband is your Maker, whose name is the Lord of hosts”*; Ezekiel 16:30-35 describes Israel’s harlotry; Hosea 2:19). The analogy of marriage works so well because it is the original relationship. Before humanity had children, best friends, grandparents, employers, or coaches, we had one man and one woman joined as one flesh. We relate to this better than any other relationship. And just as marriage opens our eyes to the most blissful highs it also reveals the most painful lows. Nobody is capable of hurting you more intimately than a spouse, as God’s repeatedly broken heart can attest.

Because God is the original designer of marriage, He knows best how to prescribe and practice it. His use of the word husband to describe His relationship with us is no empty sentiment. Rather, He is the very best husband imaginable. He knew what it was like to sacrifice and toil for the object of His affection before we had consciousness. So when His word gives boundaries for marriage, we should give them our full attention and obedience (Proverbs 6:23ff, Malachi 2:14-16, Matthew 5:27-32, Matthew 19:1-12). But is it enough to simply “keep the rules”? Is any earthly wife happy if her husband does this only? Go back to the prophet Hosea and see, within that very context, what God thinks about a relationship that is based on nothing but empty rule-keeping (Hosea 6:6-7). It is not that the rules hold no value – on the contrary, the rules are so valuable that they cannot be kept properly without intense investment. The rules of marriage (whether to a spouse or God) are so important that one must not cheapen them through empty obedience!

As Christ Loves

The love that we share goes beyond rule-keeping – though it is a necessary part of it. As a wife is obedient to her husband because of respect for him (Ephesians 5:22,33) so we do as Christ says because we trust His wisdom, power, and pure intentions. We obey Him and love Him but because He made the unequalled gesture of self-sacrifice. So too, husbands should love their own wives as if they were a part of the body, preserved and protected from all harm (5:25-30). Marriage is the greatest object lesson in true love that we can experience. We must see our own husbands and wives in the way that Christ sees us and constantly cultivate our willingness to sacrifice all for our most precious companion. Marriage teaches me that it is possible to lose my love and fall into the trap of superficial obedience to the rule – but the real reward is found in experiencing marriage with my whole heart, in true love. But most of all, I have learned that marriage is a relationship that is intended for God and His people first and foremost. We will only be married in this life (and it is often filled with trouble, heartache, and failure), but we will be the bride of Christ for all eternity (Revelation 21:2,9).