**Major on the Minors: Major Faithfulness (Hosea, Part 2)**

Young Adults – Highland Community Church

February 1, 2021

Big Idea: God’s faithfulness far exceeds our sinfulness

Key Text: Hos. 10:1-2; 13:6, 14

Principles:

1. Never confuse prosperity with spirituality (10:1-2)
2. Never allow God’s blessings to induce spiritual blindness (13:6)
3. God’s faithfulness far exceeds our sinfulness (13:14)

Do you remember the day you turned sixteen? I made my way down to the DMV for my driver’s test. I had literally been counting down the days until I could get my license – I couldn’t wait for the freedom, the feeling of being a ‘real adult.’ But at the same time, no one warned me about how expensive gas was, or the completely unnerving feeling of driving past a police officer going 10 over, wondering if you’re about to get nailed with a ticket – so getting my license was slightly overrated, and I didn’t realize that on my 16th birthday. I was really nervous, because I simply wanted to pass, and I knew the ridicule I would face at school if I failed. Right as the test began, I’m pulled out of the DMV lot and onto the main road, making sure I came to a complete stop at the stop sign – shaking because I was so nervous. And just before I turned onto the main road, the proctor looked at me and said a phrase I will never forget: “You might want to turn on your blinker.” My heart sank – she was right, my blinker wasn’t on. I thought I had used it, but apparently not. So, I engaged my indicator, and continued on the with test – the whole time thinking, “I’ve failed… I’ve failed…” I almost just turned around and went back into the lot. As we finished, and walked out of the car – she announced to my parents, we had a successful exam, with just one point off. He passed! I couldn’t believe what I had just heard. Talk about grace, redemption, a second chance.

My dumb story pales in comparison to one of the greatest second chance stories in all of Scripture, where God commands Hosea, one of His prophet-preachers, to marry a prostitute, and have children with her. But she is unfaithful to her husband, breaks their marriage covenant, and goes after countless other lovers and abandons her family. God once again commands Hosea to find his wife, and buy her back– to redeem her. So, he goes to the market, and pays money plus a lot of barley, to get her back from sex slavery. Remember, God has a purpose in all things, and by commanding Hosea to marry Gomer, and all of the events that followed, Hosea’s own life story became the subject of his sermons – trying to get the people’s attention, so that they could understand their own remarkable depravity, and at the same time the unconditional love of the Father. Hosea is a two part book – the first part is the narrative, the story; and the second part is Hosea’s sermons, based on his life story.

Even though God loved the Israelites with a loyal love that they never deserved, rescuing them from Egypt, bringing them to a new land, providing for all of their needs, and ultimately giving them the opportunity for a relationship with the God of the Universe – they ran after other gods, the gods of the people in the land, shattering the covenant that they made with the Lord at Mount Sinai. And through his message, especially as Hosea interprets his story and preaches his sermon after chapter 3, including some direct messages from the Lord, he warns the people – you look just like Gomer, you are running off after other gods. And the patience of the Lord won’t last forever. God wants to be gracious toward you, but you have to repent! But the people didn’t believe Hosea’s message – (read Hos. 4:1-2). They ignored him, and didn’t listen. Even such a provocative story couldn’t get their attention, because they were blind to their idolatry, and they really liked their sin. Even though God was offering them a second chance, and offering them forgiveness – they turned their backs and kept rebelling. Over and over again, he uses that word ‘whoredom’ to describe their spiritual condition.

We have to remember their life situation – they were living blatant, sinful lifestyles, while at the same time, God’s discipline was nowhere to be found – the people were living in a time of great prosperity. There was no war, there was great production from their crops, and the people were living peaceful, happy lifestyles. For the Israelites, and for many people in the ancient world, they held to a pretty strict retribution theology, which went something like this. If life was going great, and they had all kinds of material blessings, then God must have been happy with them. And the converse was also true, if life was horrible, and they were going through all sorts of trials, then God must be angry with them and disciplining them.

And of course, this is partially true. God promised blessings for the Israelites for obedience, and discipline for disobedience (which was often material – no rain, bad crops, evil enemies, etc.). But we have to remember, that one of God’s attributes is patience – and we see clearly throughout all of Scripture – God is patient, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). God’s judgment and discipline is rarely immediate – for example, if we got what we instantly deserved, none of us would be alive right now. If the just punishment for our sin was immediate, we would have been wiped out long ago. God is remarkably patient!

God was being patient with the Israelites in the midst of their military success, widespread peace, and lots of material success, giving them time to repent. Because they judged their relationship with God through the lens of their prosperity, they thought that they were in really good shape! Since we might find some significant similarities between our culture and the Israelite culture – like prosperity and peace, we need to listen up, and make sure that we don’t make the same mistakes. In reality, Israel’s prosperity had an inverse relationship with their spirituality:

*Israel is a luxuriant vine
    that yields its fruit.
The more his fruit increased,
    the more altars he built;
as his country improved,
    he improved his pillars.****2****Their heart is false;
    now they must bear their guilt.
The Lord will break down their altars
    and destroy their pillars* (Hos. 10:1-2).

Hosea talks about altars and pillars – altars would be used to worship other gods, as would the pillars. The more that Israel’s bounty increased, the more prosperity they experienced, the more that they turned after idolatry. The more that they worshiped Baal and worshiped Asherah. They worshiped the creation, the good gifts that the Lord had given to them, instead of their creator. The more money they made, the less they worshiped God.

If that’s not relevant for our world today, then nothing is. We live in a world of remarkable prosperity and peace. Our culture hasn’t had a major conflict/war in decades. The average income in America is on the rise – adjusted for inflation, the average household income is up 15k over the last 20 years. While our country gets richer and richer, our country is running farther and farther away from God. In America, there is an inverse relationship between prosperity and spirituality.

But at the same time, some of the same prosperity ideology has crept its way into the church. Think on the prosperity gospel movement, which is one of the fastest growing theological movements across the globe, and it is probably the most dangerous theological movement today. Pastors who say something like, Jesus loves you, and died for you, so that you can be happy, so that you can drive that dream car and buy that dream house, so that you can land that dream job and marry that perfect spouse – that your life can be perfect! So, all you need to do is name it and claim it – because God wants you to be happy. The more money you have, the more success you have, the more God loves you. It’s a sad excuse for prosperity gospel preachers to live lives of opulent luxury, because it’s a sign of God’s blessing on their lives.

Prayer is not the path to prosperity. Faith is not the road to fat pay checks. We don’t give in order to get something from God. Jesus’ number one goal is not our happiness. And if this is the Jesus that you signed up to follow, then you’re not following the right Jesus. Friends, Jesus didn’t die for us to make us happy. Jesus died for us to save us from eternity separated from God in hell. Jesus died for us so that we could have a relationship with Himself. Jesus died for us to bring us back to life from the dead. As we read Scripture, God never promises us earthly blessing and prosperity – it is actually quite the opposite – God promises us persecution and opposition. He promises trials and hardships, pain and suffering.

Obviously, prosperity theology wasn’t invented in America in the 1980s – the people of Israel were tempted with this same errant belief system. They used their prosperity as a spiritual thermometer. You know exactly what a thermometer does – and chances are, we’ve had our temperatures taken more in the last year that we had in our entire life previously. A thermometer measures our temperature – which is a direct sign of our health. If our temperature is around 98 degrees, then that’s a pretty good sign we don’t have an infection. But if we are running a temperature, we probably aren’t very healthy. (READ 12:8)

When the Israelites used prosperity as a thermometer, the more money, the more wealth, the more success that they would have, they believed it was a direct indication of God’s perspective on their holiness. But if I had to guess, many of us have had thoughts along the same line. And they sound something like this: My stock portfolio is growing exponentially – so God must be pleased with me. God is giving me success in my ministry, so I must have a really deep relationship with God. God just keeps giving me promotion after promotion at work – he must be pleased with me! Or how about the opposite – I just can’t seem to shake this depression. God must be angry with me. I just got fired. I just got dumped. My car just got totaled. God must be disciplining me. Have you, have I ever used our prosperity as a spiritual thermometer?

1. **Don’t confuse prosperity with spirituality**

When we see good things in our lives, is God blessing us? Certainly. Or, when we see pain in our lives, could God be disciplining us? Certainly. But the correlation is never automatic – for the same reason why David asks over and over again in the Psalms – why are the wicked prospering? In other words, why do the evil people have the huge homes and fancy cars and flawless vacations? It doesn’t feel fair!

When we receive a good gift in our lives, when we are blessed with something positive, we know where it always comes from – the Lord. James tells us that every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights. Certainly, He is the giver of every good gift. Every promotion, every friendship, every new car and new apartment. But, just because God gives us a gift does not mean that He’s pleased with the way we are living our lives. We need to be very careful not to confuse God’s blessing with God’s approval.

There are other metrics that we need to use as the thermometer of our spirituality. Think of Galatians 5 – the fruit of the Spirit. Do our lives look like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Think about the Ten Commandments? Are our lives characterized by idolatry or lust? Hate or deceit? Think about how Paul talks about the Christian walk – as a race. Are we running well? Are we growing in our love for Jesus? Are we growing in how we reflect Jesus to the world around us?

But that wasn’t the only mistake that Israel made as they responded to their prosperity. Not only did they think that God was pleased with them, but their wealth also blinded them to the real issues within their hearts:

*But when they had grazed, they became full, they were filled, and their heart was lifted up; therefore, they forgot me* (Hos. 13:6).

The blessings of the Lord, the good gifts that He gave his people, induced them to forget Him. This is such a difficult catch-22. When we pause and think about it, God has blessed us tremendously – from our church to our friends, to our families and jobs and hobbies. God has given us many good gifts. But in the prosperity and blessing that the Lord gives to us, it is so very easy to forget the Lord. We feel like we don’t have any ‘needs,’ its easy to lose our daily dependence on the Lord.

1. **Never allow God’s blessings to induce spiritual blindness (13:6)**

 I don’t know about you, but I’ve found that my prayer life increases significantly when life is hard – when things are tough. But when things are going well – it is way easier to forget the Lord. And I think this might be one of the reasons why God allows trials into our lives, because they provide an acute awareness of our need for God, the fragility of life, and the importance of the right priorities. It’s not until someone’s 401k portfolio loses 40% of its value that they realize their daily need for God to provide. It’s not until someone finds themselves laying flat on their back in a hospital bed realizing the blessing of good health. It’s not until we get dumped by the girlfriend or boyfriend until we realize how much we appreciated that relationship.

 Friends, let me step aside for just a moment. God intentionally allows the pain into our life, for reasons that are far above my pay grade. I don’t know how, I don’t know why, but I do know that God is sovereign, and He is in control, even in the midst of the pain – and he promises to work all things together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. But that doesn’t minimize the pain in the moment. It’s not a secret that this has been a particularly painful year, filled with a disproportionate amount of loneliness, loss, isolation, pain, and struggle. But as followers of Christ, when we are confronted with pain, we have a choice – will we allow the pain to drive us closer to the Lord, or will we let it drive us farther away?

 I’ve found in my own life, that God uses the pain to grow my faith, even more than a mission trip, a No Regrets Men’s Conference, a YA Campout – now, those are great things, and faith-building things. But even more than that, God has used the pain in my life to grow my faith, if I will let Him. How’s your heart today – is it bitter and hard toward the Lord, angry about the pain He’s allowed in the last year? Or is it soft, even in the pain and sadness and loss, are you allowing the Lord to grow your faith? Am I seeking the Lord in the midst of the pain – not only asking Him to fix the pain, or give us what we ‘want’ – but more than that, growing in our love for Him, our trust in Him – looking to Him as our rock, our foundation? Let God use the pain to grow your faith.

 But life isn’t always painful, and there are times when things are going well, when we might not ‘feel’ like we have an acute need, when we have money in our bank accounts, food on the shelves, haven’t been to the doctor in a while, our relationships all seem to be going well – in those moments, how do we keep God first and not let stuff turn our hearts away? Should we liquidize our assets and live on the street? We need to build some barriers, some ‘guardrails’ into our life so that we don’t forget the Lord in the midst of the prosperity that He gives.

**Here’s the first way to guard against blessing blindness - Sabbath rest.** Sabbath is an OT term that actually comes from the creation account. God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh – not because He was tired or needed rest, but because He desired to model rest for us. And in the 10 Commandments, God expects His people, commands His people, to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. God warns the Israelites in Jeremiah 17, that if they don’t remember and honor the Sabbath as He instructed them, then they would face severe discipline. But why? Because the Sabbath is a weekly break from the stresses of normal life, to focus on God and His people. And as we see throughout the prophets, the Israelites weren’t very good at remembering the Sabbath, and they faced the Lord’s discipline. God, the creator of the universe, has only asked for one day a week – I think that’s the least we can give to the person who deserves all seven.

Think of it this way – I’m not an Olympic swimmer, but I’ve done a little training in the water for a triathlon, and it is much easier to swim in a poll than it is to swim in open water. When I’m training in the pool, there’s a line on the bottom of the pool, there’s guardrails on either side, that make sure you’re headed in the right direction. But the Christian life is more like swimming in a lake than a chlorine pool. For me, I have a natural tendency to turn to the right when I swim. So, if I just keep my head down, and just keep swimming, I’ll end up going in a giant circle, which completely defeats the purpose of an open water swim. So, every 30 seconds or so, I will pause and look up – and make sure that I’m going in the right direction, and re-center on my goal.

That’s Sabbath rest for us – it’s a weekly pause, to look up at our goal (to look at the Lord), and make sure we are still headed in the right direction. Without it, we will just keep swimming in circles, and we won’t even realize it. Practically, that means taking a day each week, historically Sunday (but it doesn’t have to be), to take a break from normal work, to spend time with our church family, to worship the Lord and spend time in His Word, doing God-oriented things. For Hannah and I, Sunday isn’t a Sabbath day for us, because I’m ‘working’ – it’s a great day, just not a ‘restful’ day. So, we try to set aside our Fridays as a day of rest. Lately, they look like this. We will sleep in, and maybe go skiing in the morning for a couple hours. I try not to do any work if possible, and we try to have some extended quiet time. It’s a day of rest, without the pressure of productivity. Remembering the Sabbath to our spiritual health is much like exercise and dieting to our physical health – they are what we might call ‘preventative’ measures. We keep other problems at bay when we have the weekly check-in, that weekly ‘pause’ to make sure that we are on the right track. Do you take one day a week to focus on the Lord? Do you take one day a week to rest from work, spend time with your church community, and spend extra time with the Lord, reading His Word and in prayer? If not, that would be an excellent thing to build into the rhythm of your life, protecting ourselves from the same blindness as the Israelites.

Here's another guardrail to protect against blessing blindness – generosity. When we realize that God has given us good ‘gifts’ – we should count it a privilege to share those good gifts with others. We need to hold what we have with an open palm rather than a closed fist.

Jesus tells a story of a man who’d been forgiven a billion-dollar debt, who then chooses not to forgive one of his own servants who owes him 1,000 dollars. The hypocrisy is crystal clear. How often do we do the same thing? Jesus has forgiven us all of our debt. He has provided countless good gifts in our lives. He’s even given us Himself. When someone asks for an hour of our time, or a missionary asks for some financial support, why can it be so difficult to say yes? We’ve received the greatest imaginable gift, Christians should be the greatest gift givers on the planet. Even Jesus said, it’s more blessed to give than to receive. This week, let’s be willing to share the things that God has given to us. It starts with a simple prayer: “God, how can I be generous this week? Who can I share with this week?” Maybe we can share our finances – starting to support a missionary, or giving to your local church. Maybe God has given you a home, and you can invite people into your homes and share your space, and your food. Maybe God’s given you some extra time, and you can help a friend with some projects, or run an errand for neighbor. Let’s hunt for ways to be generous, and put Jesus’ saying to the test, it’s more blessed to give than receive.

Here’s a third way to guard against blessing blindness – gratitude. When we say thank you, it reduces our entitlement complex, thinking that somehow, I deserved this, or I earned this. Anytime the Lord gives us a good gift, we need to say thank you. We need to use good manners! At various times of my life, I’ve used a gratitude journal. At the end of the day, I’ll write down 10 things that I was thankful for that day. And I’m amazed at the things I remember – so when we feel ourselves getting extra grumpy, or extra entitled – maybe this would be a good thing to try for a week, directing our gratitude to the Lord who gives every good gift.

Israel ignored the Sabbath, neglected generosity, and forgot to say thank you. I pray that we won’t make the same mistakes. For Israel, even in the midst of their rebellion and idolatry, and their coming discipline, God foreshadows a hope that will supersede their rebellion and sinful behavior, and that will overcome even the power of the grave itself. Flip over a couple pages to Hosea 13:14:

*I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol;
    I shall redeem them from Death.
O Death, where are your plagues?
    O Sheol, where is your sting?
    Compassion is hidden from my eyes* (Hos. 13:14).

My guess is that this passage also sounds a little bit familiar – because Paul quotes this (someone loosely) in 1Cor. 15. Sheol is the OT version of hell, or the grave. We all know what the sting of death feels like – there really is no other feeling quite like it. I vividly remember the first time I really felt that sting – I was with a group of my friends from my school – I was in 7th grade. We were down in Southern Wisconsin on a weekend trip doing a concert at a church, and our principal and a couple teachers chaperoned. And when we woke up the next morning, we were having fun and hanging out, but the two teachers disappeared for a while, and we could tell that something wasn’t quite right. They ushered us upstairs into this youth room, sat us down, and said – “Our Principal died last night in his sleep from a massive heart attack.” I still remember that feeling – I had never been shocked like that before, I’d never lost someone like that before, especially that abruptly. We had just been with him the night before, hanging out with us! And it stung, only the way that death can sting. I’m sure you know the feeling. Maybe you’ve felt it within the last the last week, month, or year. And simply saying “I’m sorry” will do nothing to fix that pain. Jesus, through the cross, has removed the sting of death – because death no longer has the final say. And Paul proves it by changing the words when he quotes this exact passage in 1 Cor. 15:

***54****When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:*

*“Death is swallowed up in victory.”****55****“O death, where is your victory?
    O death, where is your sting?”*

***56****The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.****57****But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

 Did you notice the little word that Paul changed? Death, where is your victory (not plagues)? When Jesus was condemned to die, death thought the game was already over. When Jesus carried his cross to Golgotha, death thought it had gained the upper hand, but it had not. When those nails drove through Jesus’ hands and feet, death thought it was winning the battle, but it was not. When He cried out “it is finished,” death thought that it had won, but it really had lost. Because tetelestai was not a cry of surrender, but a cry of victory! Because, when Jesus died, and rose from the dead – he defeated death once and for all – by promising us an eternal hope, a bodily resurrection from the dead (Read v. 57). Hosea probably had no idea the significance of his prophecy, that someday – Christ would come an remove the sting of death, the power of the grave, once and for all.

This doesn’t mean that death doesn’t hurt – it does. But death won’t win. It can’t win. Because Jesus has already won. And ultimately, that was the hope for Hosea’s people, and that is the hope for us today. We have a hope that transcends the grave. Jesus is the prefect fulfillment of these prophecies, and the perfect redeemer of our broken lives. SHARE the GOSPEL. Here is the big picture, one-sentence summary for the book of Hosea:

1. **God’s faithfulness far exceeds our sinfulness**

If you feel that guilt weighing on your shoulders because of past mistakes, God’s faithfulness exceeds yoru sinfulness. If you want to rewind because of your biggest regrets, God’s faithfulness exceeds your sinfulness. The gospel doesn’t minimize our sin, but maximizes His grace. The gospel doesn’t minimize death, but Jesus’ hope is stronger than death itself. Because even though we deserve death, even though we deserve to experience the full punishment of our own sinful behavior, Jesus has offered us new life through the gospel. Only Jesus removes the sting of death with a hope that transcends the grave. Because someday, if we know Jesus, we will be with him forever. And as one of my friends just reminded me a couple weeks ago – that moment, when we see Jesus, is going to be amazing. There won’t even be words to express what that is going to feel like. There is nothing better than knowing Jesus.

Questions:

1. How does prosperity affect the life of a Christian? How has prosperity influenced your spiritual life? How can we work together to make sure that we focus on God even when things are going well?
2. Tonight, we discussed rest, generosity, and gratitude as ways to combat blessing blindness. Which is the strongest in your life? Which is the weakest? How can we grow in our weaker areas this week?
3. How have you felt the sting of death in your own life? How does 1 Cor. 15:54-57 give us a hope that transcends earthly death?