

## **I desire mercy, not sacrifice**

Hosea 5:15–6:6

Psalm 50:7–15

Romans 4:13–25

Matthew 9:9–13, 18–26

### **Text: Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:12-13**

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings.

But when he (Jesus) heard this, he said, ‘Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.’

### **Introduction**

John Wesley was a sixteenth century Anglican priest who is credited with the founding of the worldwide Christian movement known as Methodism. In Canada the United Church is the largest inheritor of this tradition even though current trends within the church distance it from this heritage. In 1925 the then Methodist Church in Canada joined with Presbyterian and Congregational churches to form The United Church of Canada. In 2025 a number of celebratory centennial events are being planned for the United Church: I think that revisiting the gospel heritage of Wesley’s preaching and teaching would be a fitting centennial theme. The great hymn writer Charles Wesley said this of his brother John, "My brother was, I think, born for the benefit of knaves." (Knave means an unprincipled or crafty person).

In his preaching John Wesley persisted in telling people that God could do something with sin beyond forgiving it: they could know victory. As his Methodist people stepped forward out of filth, hopelessness, self-contempt, alcoholic delirium, debt and disgrace he insisted that there was no limit to the work of grace which God longed to work and could effect in them *now*. Wesley believed that no one was beyond our Lord’s help. This belief coupled with his desire to be generous towards people perhaps is what led Charles to make the comment he did about him with regard to benefiting knaves.

And one of those knaves Charles may have had in mind was their clergy brother-in-law Westley Hall who was married to their sister Martha. Martha and her husband had ten children, nine of whom died in infancy. As child succeeded child Martha became worn out. She needed help in the home; a live-in housekeeper,

Betty Greenaway, was hired to assist her. Meanwhile, Westley had become a notorious philanderer. Needless to say, in no time he had impregnated the family's housekeeper. By the time word of this reached John Wesley, Westley Hall had absented himself from wife Martha for an extended period. In 1747 John wrote a letter to his brother-in-law warning him concerning the deceitfulness of sin and recited to him the things he had done with regard to several women. At the conclusion of that letter Wesley wrote, "O how you have grieved the Spirit of God! Return to him with weeping, fasting, and mourning. You are in the very belly of hell, only the pit has not yet shut its mouth upon you. Arise, thou sleeper, and call upon thy God!"<sup>1</sup> Even with all that had happened John Wesley still thinks there is hope for his wayward brother-in-law.

1. With this story about Wesley and his brother-in-law in your mind—and perhaps other personal stories that it calls to mind—listen again to what Matthew tells us about Jesus. "As Jesus sat at dinner in the house, many tax-collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax-collectors and sinners?' But when he heard this, he said, 'Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.'

Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Jesus is quoting a word from God to Israel spoken through the prophet Hosea—the text we read today—"For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice." Jesus is quoting the Greek translation of this text in the Septuagint—the translation of the Hebrew scriptures available in his day. God's complaint about his people spoken through Hosea was that they were simply going through the motions. They offered the ritual sacrifices but their hearts were far from God and it showed in the idolatry that permeated their lives.

Hosea is the prophet God commands to marry a prostitute and the children that are born to her are not Hosea's but the result of her continuing infidelity. Finally she leaves Hosea and goes back to her prostitution. Years later God calls him to go find her and she now has hit rock bottom—you can tell by the cheap price he pays to buy her back. The cachet surrounding her became the cachet surrounding him. Her reputation was his; her disgrace his. But only one thing mattered: she was home again, home with him. Hosea's domestic situation was a picture of Israel's forsaking of God with her idolatry. But through Hosea God reveals that judgement

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth J. Collins, *John Wesley: A Theological Journey*, Abingdon Press, 2003. p.150.

wasn't the last word; God's mercy was the final word, together with the mercy-quickenened repentance and reconciliation of God's people.

Hosea is preoccupied with having his people know God. The heart of his message is found in this text Jesus cited, "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

God didn't want sacrifices and burnt offerings? Of course he did. They were part of the temple liturgy; they were instituted by God and the people were appointed to observe them. Since sacrifices and burnt offerings were instituted and appointed by God the people could never be faulted for worshipping in accord with the temple liturgy. But Hosea's point was this: liturgy is an outward vehicle given us to express our innermost self-abandonment to God. Liturgy is an outward vehicle for expressing our innermost offering of ourselves, our sacrifice, to God. Liturgy, however, is never an outward substitute for anything inward. Israelites were never to offer lamb or ram in the temple as a substitute for offering themselves. If liturgy—anyone's liturgy in any era—is viewed as a substitute for the worshipper's faith and faithfulness then liturgy is useless; worse than useless in fact, for then it affronts God and deceives us. Hosea insisted that the people's worship in the temple be the occasion of their ever-deepening knowledge of God.

Now in Hebrew idiom 'knowledge' doesn't mean 'acquisition of information.' In Hebrew idiom knowledge pertains to personal encounter; more profoundly, to know is to be so very intimately acquainted with an actuality as to find oneself profoundly transformed by such acquaintance. To know pain isn't to acquire information about neurophysiology; to know pain is to be so very intimately acquainted with pain that one is different forever. To know one's spouse, in Hebrew idiom, isn't to accumulate information about the person to whom we are married. To know one's spouse isn't merely to engage in sexual intimacy. Rather it's to meet her, encounter her so very intimately that one's own life is forever different. In Hebrew idiom a man knows his wife only to the extent that encountering her non-defensively (that is, encountering her without trying to master her or manipulate her) has rendered him a different person.

Our knowledge of God, Hosea insisted, Hebrew that he was; our knowledge of God is the difference our engagement with God has effected within us. Jesus' challenge to go and learn what this means is a challenge to get to know God. The Hebrew word translated 'mercy' in the Greek translation Jesus' cites is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It is the word that is used to speak of the steadfast love of God; the love that would be God's final word about his wayward people; the love that

would eventuate in the cross where Father and Son give themselves completely in order to bring us home. Knowing God's love for us ought to inform our treatment of others.

2. Matthew tells us that many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with Jesus and his disciples. "Tax collectors and sinners" had become a euphemism to refer to the society's undesirables. What one political candidate referred to as "deplorables." Or "fringe people who hold unacceptable views", as said another politician. 'Misogynists and extremists Nazis' may be a current comparable phrase. I read a recent article about the terrorizing of people in Mexico by drug cartels; the article detailed the brazen murder of journalists who dared to report on their activities and the corruption of governments and police that left many murders unsolved. Perhaps, how these people feel about drug cartels approaches what people in Jesus' day felt about tax collectors.

Tax collectors in Jesus' day were considered traitors to Israel because they made their living collecting taxes for the enemy occupier Rome. The peace Rome secured—and the lavish lifestyle of many in Rome—was achieved at the end of a sword and financed by taxation of conquered peoples. The tax collectors were also considered thieves because of the excessive amounts they pocketed personally with the added commission on top of what Rome demanded. Matthew himself was a chief tax collector; he had jurisdiction over a number of tax collectors.

Under Roman occupation Jewish people were confronted with the question of how one remains faithful to God living as an occupied people. There were several answers given. The Sadducees and Herodians said we need to go along to get along. Tax collectors would have been of this persuasion. The Pharisees said that strict adherence to the law was the way. The Zealots said that ousting Rome—kill the intruders—was the only real solution. The Essences said, we will withdraw to the wilderness. I noticed that Jesus had both a tax collector and a Zealot among his disciples. (Luke 6:15)

The Pharisees, in their zeal for adherence to the law, had written off the tax collectors and sinners. Having no contact with such people was, in their minds, an expression of their dedication to God, a discipline of faithful adherence to the law. Jesus' challenge to them was to learn what God means in saying, "I desire mercy, and not sacrifice." God's judgment announced through Hosea was that Israel's "love (hesed) was like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early." The pharisees were harsh with anyone who, in their view didn't measure up.

Jesus' welcome of tax-collectors and sinners was a flash-point that aroused the opposition of Pharisees. It is important to note that Jesus' welcome wasn't because they were tax-collectors and sinners; Jesus' welcome was not some sign that sinners were more fun to be around than the Pharisees. Jesus went to the homes of Pharisees when invited. We hear a lot these days about something called 'radical inclusion' and sometimes Jesus' welcome of marginalized people in his society is pointed to as an inspiration for this modern idea of inclusion.

Jesus' welcome of these people was the occasion of his call to follow him. Jesus' welcome has their rescue from sin in mind. He had just called Matthew to make the decision to leave his tax booth and follow him. It seems that this gathering of fellow tax-collectors was occasioned by Matthew's decision to follow him. Jesus' message was the same for all, "the kingdom of heaven has drawn near, repent and believe the good news." The inclusive aspect of the gospel is that we are—each one of us—sinners in need of the Saviour.

Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." To these tax-collectors and sinners Jesus called them to repent; to follow him in his obedience to the One he called the Father. God's arms are open wide to receive us into fellowship with himself. God is one who forgives their sin. It is interesting to note that Matthew's gospel—the gospel that tradition understands this tax-collector eventually writes—is the gospel that emphasises the believer's life as one of obedience to Jesus Christ. Jesus said that a believer's love for him is expressed in keeping his commandments.

Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." To these Pharisees they needed to be awakened or reminded that they too needed a Saviour. They needed reminding that God has been merciful to them and God's mercy towards them ought to issue in mercy towards others. Perhaps they were relying on their self-disciplined adherence to the law—they had the liturgy down cold but so were their hearts; all their sacrifices were in perfect order, but their hearts were far from God. There is lots of self-righteousness in our world today both inside and outside the church. Crusading for certain causes is attractive to people because it gives a sense of meaning and purpose; it can also lead to looking down on those who don't get with the programme.

Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." Ultimately this is a call to get to know God. As we learn more of him and catch glimpses of the magnitude of his love we correct and deepen our understanding of the meaning of the mercy God desires. The arms of the crucified Son of God are wide open. "I

am standing at the door, knocking,” said the risen Jesus, “if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.”