

Sacrificial Love

By Anand Peter

Let me begin by saying that Christ's love is not sacrificial love; it is all-encompassing, unconditional love. Jesus desires that all the faithful learn to love unconditionally. We know much about this love, but today we will deal with another kind of love.

Let us read Hosea 3:1: "Then said the LORD unto me, Go yet, love a woman beloved of her friend, yet an adulteress, according to the love of the LORD toward the children of Israel, who look to other gods, and love flagons of wine" (Hosea 3:1). Here the Lord is speaking of a love that can have several meanings: a strong desire, compassion for family, a romantic encounter, or emotional care and commitment. Here God calls Hosea to love Gomer as He has loved Israel.

God asked Hosea to do something unthinkable, by any standards: to buy back his adulterous, unrepentant wife, and to continue to love her. It must not have been very convincing, or even comprehensible, to those who knew of Gomer's adultery, to hear Hosea say that God continued to love idolatrous Israel, just as He had instructed Hosea to love Gomer. They must have heard God speak through many of the anointed, but the real impact came home to them when they saw God's words playing out in Hosea's sacrificial love for his wife.

For a period, Gomer was on her own, and to support herself she must have sold herself as a slave, or lived as another man's mistress. This necessitated Hosea to buy her back, paying the price for her.

In the Ten Commandments of God, there is a clear warning against adultery: "Thou shalt not commit adultery" (Exodus 20:14). Most people read this commandment within its limited scope of being unfaithful to a spouse, or of indulging in sexual immorality. While the Jews did try to expand upon how to practise the commandments, breaking each into multiple sub-commandments, they missed the point, even within their own limited interpretation of this commandment. Jesus brought out its true meaning when He said, as Matthew records: "Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Jesus expanded its scope far beyond how it was, and even now still is, read by many.

The narrative in Hosea chapter 3 is not about Hosea and Gomer, and whether they lived happily ever after. We are called upon to read God's instruction as including both spiritual and physical adultery, and both are dangerous. God was disappointed with His people, because they had committed spiritual adultery against Him, just as Gomer had committed physical adultery against Hosea.

Interestingly, both types of adultery begin with disappointment and dissatisfaction — imagined or real — within an existing relationship. Spiritual adultery begins in a person who had once accepted God, but who is found wanting in deep faith, trust, and commitment. Such people tend to stray, and to experiment with practices in other religions that they find, for a while, appealing. In this process, the affection one had once had is gradually shifted towards these forbidden areas. In both spiritual and physical adultery,

the shift happens gradually; especially in the former, it is not usually an impulsive decision. Tragically, both cases involve the creation of a fantasy about what the new object, relationship, or affection, can do for a person. Fantasy, being what it is, will be short-lived, but will leave an enduring, disastrous, residual effect upon a person. We owe our lives to God, and what God has blessed us with is not a fantasy, but something real.

But all is not lost for people who find themselves in such circumstances, or such a quandary. God assures us that He is benevolent, and would take back, with a repentant love, all those who choose to return to Him. I have called it sacrificial love, because God grieves for people who go astray, whom otherwise He would have loved unconditionally. To that love of God, He adds a pinch of repentance and sacrifice, just as we add a pinch of salt to make food tastier. Sacrificial love, too, should be reciprocal: those who return to God must add a little more to their own love for God, through a sincere attitude of sacrifice.