

“Catch Me if you Can!”

Good morning, Grace! Anyone rooting for the Seahawks?

Patriots? Commercials? Tonight someone will lift the Lombardi trophy and their pursuit of a championship will be completed.

BUCKEYES: Speaking of a championship, something happened since I was with you last. We didn't get to celebrate it together did we?

That's right! It's been almost 3 weeks but the Cleveland's are still celebrating.

Yeah I'm training them up right! What an unbelievable season and we fans can celebrate a long time. As a matter of fact I had the chance last week to be at the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta and I was able to get close to the trophy.

It was pretty cool to be that close. But it hit me there that the season was over. I remember what Coach Urban Meyer said on the field seconds after the Buckeyes won. He said, “The Chase is complete.” We fans might enjoy this for a while but the players started next season on Tuesday at conditioning. Man, that completed pursuit didn't last long.

SERIES: Today as we launch the new series we're going to talk about a pursuit that will ...completely satisfy. It's the pursuit of love. This series is based on a story told in OT book called Hosea. Turn there in

your Bible. From this prophets small book we are going to learn about pursuing love in our own lives.

PURSUE: Just like that championship we are all pursuing something.

Some of us are pursuing the success that comes through our jobs or education. You want to hoist the achievement trophy.

Some of us are pursuing fame by what brings us credit and glory. Our entire lives are filtered through the lens of what makes us look good. You want to hoist the attention trophy.

Some of us are pursuing connections. We will do whatever it takes to make and keep people we want around us. You want to hoist the approval trophy.

*We pursue what we hope will give us
what we think we want.*

Make sure to be here next week as we will talk more in depth about the pursuits that don't deliver and what really does.

CATCH ME IF YOU CAN: Leonardo DiCaprio starred the movie *“Catch Me if you Can”*. Based off a true story of a young man named Frank Abagnale Jr who used confidence scams to forge Pan Am Airline payroll checks to the tune of \$2.8 million dollars. He impersonates an airplane pilot. He lives the life and leaves Pan Am with the bills. Authorities chase him all over Europe.

Why was he running? It all started when he ran away from home at the age of 16 because his parents were getting divorced and he didn't know where he belonged. He was running from reality pursuing love.

We are all pursuing something in hopes that it can deliver what our soul longs for. Our soul longs for security which comes through love. We all want love. On some level we're all pursuing love.

VALENTINES: Love. This is the time of year where love is in the air – at least the plastic fake Valentine's Day kind. Stores give us a visual representation of love in our day. Flowers. Cards. Candy. Sex. Cupid. Emotions. Feelings.

Q: *What would it do to your life if you experienced real love?* If you've been around the church for any length of time you've heard the phrase "God loves you". It's true. But what does it really mean that God loves you?

SET UP: God wanted to give us a picture of the passion, love, and relationship He desires to have with us. And He flips our preconceived ideas upside down. He didn't give us a traditional sappy love story. My guess is that you haven't heard a lot about this book of the Bible. Honestly, I don't think I've ever heard a sermon series from this book. So let me catch you up to speed.

CHARACTERS: The book of Hosea has 2 main characters, Hosea the prophet and Gomer the prostitute. (Now I'll admit just the name Gomer made me think of one ugly prostitute – made me think of Gomer Pyle. And at face value this is an ugly love story. Hosea represents God and his relentless loving pursuit of us. Gomer represents Israel (or the people of God) and how unfaithful we are to God pursuing in others what can only be found in Him. The very beginning of the book God asks Hosea to do something He's never asked anyone to do before (or after). Look at verse 2,

"When the Lord first began speaking to Israel through Hosea, he said to him, "Go and marry a prostitute, so that some of her children will be conceived in prostitution..." – Hosea 1:2a

Stop. Hold on. You're kidding me, right? Imagine what it would have been like to be Hosea. He might have thought he had a little too much something with his dinner that evening. He had to wonder if the Prophetic network server was down because that is not a message I ever expected to download from God. This is not your normal love story.

We are drawn to love stories aren't we?

CHICK-FLICKS: My wife loves love stories. She enjoys watching *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*. I chuckle as she quotes the movies to me as we watch together. But really

we're all drawn to these redemptive love stories. We laugh through movies like Crazy, Stupid Love and Definitely Maybe.

Sometimes Hollywood does a good job and sneaks some sappy love up on us like it did to me in the movie Up! Have you seen that animation movie by Pixar? I'm pretending like I'm not crying – it's a cartoon for goodness sake, but when you think about the old man's sacrificial love for his wife...it gets ya!

And the Bible is filled with scores of famous couples and the powerful love they shared. But no one has ever tried to script a movie off of the love story recorded in the OT book of Hosea. Pretty Woman doesn't even come close!

So God asks a prophet to marry a prostitute. Not a former prostitute, but a full-fledged, card-carrying, active prostitute. And if that wasn't enough He goes further and tells him that she will have children conceived from her continued prostitution. And you, Hosea, Mr. Prophet whose name means salvation, you get to try to keep this happy family together. 😊

Q: *Why does God make such a request?*

Hosea was a spokesperson for God during desperate times. God was devastated by how His people were turning their backs on Him and worshipping false gods. They consistently looked everywhere else for the connection only God could provide.

Now God had tried to talk to them. He rescued them from slavery in Egypt. But no matter how demonstrated His love for them it didn't seem to matter. God's people continued to do their own thing. Over and over and over again.

They were essentially saying to God "catch me if you can!"

God was distraught about it. Not only did He want His prophet to deliver a message, but He wanted him to speak from the same perspective of pain and frustration He felt. We find that at the end of verse 2 when we read,

"This will illustrate how Israel has acted like a prostitute by turning against the Lord and worshipping other gods." – Hosea 1:2b (NLT)

God isn't playing games. Here is what God is saying in this story that is relevant to us today:

***What I'm pursuing is only found
in the One pursuing me.***

As weird as it may be God is so passionate about us that He commanded Hosea to engage in a marriage that would crush his heart, just as God's heart had been crushed. What we really want will only be found in a relationship with Him.

BIG BAD COP: Some of you might view God the big man upstairs who is chasing you down to hold you accountable for what you've done. So you're playing a game of "Catch me if you can". You are running away from Him.

Some of you are running away from God because you're not interested in religion. You're afraid God is trying to get you to conform to some social standard. You're afraid God is like some ball-in-chain dragging you down.

But God is not pursuing you for a religion. Religion is full of empty promises. When I rely on the rightness of my doctrine or the rightness of my actions for my standing with God rather than God himself and His grace I make a subtle but deadly mistake. Religion whispers, "If you would just..."

- Give more
- Show up more
- Serve more
- Pray more
- Read more
- Memorize more
- Sing more

Then, and only then, you will be safe. Then God will love you. At the very least if you do this then He'll love you more. The problem with religion is that it always adds.

Religion says:

Jesus + being immersed in water = salvation
 Jesus + doing communion a certain way = salvation
 Jesus + voting Republican or Democrat = salvation
 Jesus + church membership = salvation

Religion is always trying to put something in the second blank of that equation. Religions always tends to complicate what God has made simple. Religion is all about doing things to try to please God. When buy religion you sell God's love.

God is NOT pursuing you for religion. God is not chasing you with His love so you can do more. God is not pursuing us to convert us to a bunch of religious practices but into a loving relationship with him – like marriage. A self-sacrificing committed relationship.

In our story we all figure that when the prostitute marries the prophet there's a turnaround story and they live happily ever after. That's not the case. Instead Gomer wanders back into prostitution. And this is where we see an added dimension to Hosea's love for his wife. It gives picture to God's love for us. God is committed even when His people aren't. He loves you even when you're running away.

God is faithful even when we fail.

Gomer returns to prostitution and look at what God asks Hosea to do over in chapter 3:

“Then the Lord said to me, “Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the Lord still loves Israel... So I bought her back for fifteen pieces of silver and five bushels of barley and a measure of wine.” – Hosea 3:1-2 (NLT)

This act reveals at least 2 aspects of God's love I want to draw your attention to this morning. First God loves us with...

God's love is UNREASONABLE

God's love for us defies logic. Logic might have told Hosea to just let her go! But no God says, *“Go love your wife again...even though...love her again.”* Reason says let her go. God says get her back! God doesn't need us, He wants us!

HERSHEY: A few years ago we had a huge snow fall and I decided to let our dog Hershey out without a leash and at the time we didn't have a fence. I figured he couldn't go far in 10" of snow. I went out with him. But he was excited to play in the snow and took off. I pursued him from one yard to the next. He sat there and waited until I chased him and then he darted for the next yard. We reached the end of the neighborhood where I had enough. My dog sat down and I was about 10' from him when I said (in what seemed like a very human conversation).

Ok, dog, go! Have a great life, I'm going home. And that dog lay down and rolled over in surrender. If you can picture it I ended up carrying an 80 pound lab over my shoulders all the way home. We don't need a dog but we wanted him.

What God asked Hosea to do did not make sense. But then again, God's love for Israel didn't make sense either (they continued to walk away from him). God's love for you and I doesn't really make sense either because we continually walk in our own direction.

Why would God commit himself to a group of people He knew wouldn't be faithful to Him? Why not pick a group of people who would be grateful and thankful for His blessings? We love people who love us. We look for the ones faithful to us. But God calls on the cast of Jerry Springer to love. From our vantage point it's unreasonable. But not from God's.

Paul wrote to his apprentice Timothy these words:

“If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself” – 2 Timothy 2:13

It doesn't make sense but God loves dirty, ragged sinners. He loves us and it doesn't make sense. That's what it means when you hear “God loves you”.

TRANS: God's love is unreasonable. This story also reveals to us that...

God's love is UNCONDITIONAL

Hosea's love isn't based on what Gomer does. He doesn't stop loving her because of what she doesn't do. What a picture of God's love to us.

Gomer's sin has worn her out. She had flaunted herself out there. She mocked Hosea's love. She's stripped naked and on the auction block. She wasn't worth much in the eyes of people. Her beauty is gone – ruined through her lifestyle. No one wanted her. (Dramatic Pause) But Hosea did. And Hosea buys her back for ½ what a normal female slave would have been purchased for.

We tend to give up on people. We write them off or count them as dead when their love or trust has been betrayed. Not God.

GOSPEL: God doesn't give up because His love is not based on us. It's based on Him. John wrote about God's love:

"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." – 1 John 4:10

God's love is fully and unconditionally available to us through Jesus and His death on the cross. His love is unconditional and His forgiveness is received by admitting our sin and trusting Jesus' sacrifice on the cross paid for our sin. Talk about unconditional love – sacrificing your Son.

The bad news is you are worse off than you thought. The good news is you're loved more than you can imagine.

BABY DOLL: My kids all have stuff animals and as they've gotten older some of the stuffed animals have gotten dingy. The kids have toys of greater value and worth. But they still go back to that stuffed animal. It's an inseparable companion. The animal is worthless but to throw it away would be unthinkable to our kids. Their love for the worthless animal is unconditional.

Maybe you feel worthless and written off. God still wants you. He is pursuing you with a relentless love.

You can never run so far that you outrun God's love for you. No matter what you have done, no matter where you have been, he wants you and sees you as his beloved bride. God doesn't throw us on the garbage heap when we fail. He loves unconditionally.

Paul wrote these famous words to the Romans,

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." – Romans 8:38-39

TRANS: What you're pursuing can only be found in the One who is pursuing you. He is pursuing you for a relationship that is based on His unreasonable and unconditional love.

CONCLUSION

God isn't pursuing you because He needs you. He's pursuing you because He wants you. He wants to know you. He is pursuing us for a relationship.

Q: *What's your relationship status with God?*

What is the level of your relationship with God? Would you be willing to increase your relationship status?

COMMUNICATION RESPONSE

SKEPTIC: Perhaps you're here this morning and you're checking out the God thing. You were invited by someone and you're not a follower of Christ and you do not have a relationship with God. You are here doing some background checking. You've got questions about faith before you dive in. Maybe we could call your relationship status: Just talking.

Q: *Are you ready to take your next step to find out the answers to your questions?*

SEEKER: Or maybe you're ready to become a follower of Jesus Christ! You're seeking your life purpose and found it in a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. You are ready to experience the love of God and see how Jesus can change your life from the inside out.

Maybe you're here this morning and you're confused. You're not sure what to do with God. You're stuck in a rut. Maybe you had a relationship with God but you got hurt by someone. Or maybe you never had a relationship with God because someone in the church hurt you. You're just not sure what to do. Maybe you've slipped back. Your relationship status is It's Complicated.

Q: *Are you ready to take your next step of growing in your faith? Investing in your relationship daily? Every day with God.*

SERIOUS: Or you know you have a relationship with God through Jesus and you are committed to it. It's like a marriage level commitment where you're all-in with God. It's an exclusive thing where you've given your entire heart to Jesus. Your relationship status is: Married/Committed.

Q: *Are you ready to take your next step of improving your relationship? Where is weak? Need personal time? Been unfaithful?*

As the months turned into years, Gomer keeps running and Hosea keeps pursuing. She feels unlovable; Hosea keeps loving

her. She feels like Hosea should just let her go – this is who she is. Hosea sees who she can become and won't give up.

That's how God is for you. He keeps pursuing you. In your sin, in your pride, in your worry, in your gossip, in your sexual immorality, in your arrogance, in your rudeness, in your divisiveness, in your unfaithfulness He still pursues you.

Have you ever considered how you stir the emotions of God? What He feels when He sees you? God is involved and cares about you deeply. As we finish this morning I want you to pause and stop the chaos of life for a moment to ponder that.

God smiling over you, rejoicing over you, celebrating you like a groom rejoices in his bride on their wedding day. Visualize God overflowing with compassion. He is protecting you and providing for you. Stop giving excuses as to why you're disqualified. This is a pursuit anchored in a love that's about Him, not you.

“The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.” – Zephaniah 3:17

Imagine the kind of relationship with God where you want to know Him more, grow in Him more! Imagine getting to know Him at deeper, richer, sweeter levels. Stop running from God and

increase your relationship status with Him based not on what you do for Him but His love for you!

MY NEXT STEP: