

“The Book of Hosea”

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Series: *Minor Prophets*

Bible Text: Hosea 4:1-3

Preached on: May 24, 2026

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Earlier this week, some of you received an email from me, if you're on our email list, gave you a bit of a warning of what's to come. As Hobie had mentioned, we're going to take one book at a time, and so we're doing sort of a summation of each of the minor prophets week by week, and I got Hosea. So I just thought we would just kind of rip off the band-aid right here at the very beginning. If you wanted to know just how shocking and blunt and unflinching the Bible could be, we're just going to read together as we start just the opening passage. This is the opening passage of Hosea.

When the Lord first spoke to Hosea, the Lord said to Hosea, go take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the Lord.

Opening passages. You know, several weeks ago when I was in Bangladesh and we were teaching pastors there how to read and interpret the Bible, one of the first disciplines of that is we help them to understand that you're going to do this task of observation. One thing you're going to do is you're going to look for repeating words, because therein you will find some of the heart of that passage, right, when a word is repeated over and over again, it's like the Lord is drawing your attention to it. So I would ask you, class, you don't have to respond together, but what is it, right? What's the repeated word here in this passage? It's a powerful word, right? It's a word that is no less offensive today than it was the first day it was penned. We hear that word whoredom the same exact way Israel did. It hasn't lost its punch. And so throughout the entire book, this word keeps showing up, and it's really used in two different senses that kind of give us the scope of this entire book. In the one sense, it's exactly what you think it is, right? God is going to call Hosea to go and marry a woman who is a prostitute, right? It's in the very literal sense. But in the second sense, all throughout it's also going to be used to talk about the nation of Israel, God's people, and in that sense it means faithless and unworthy. Talks of idolatrous practices, pursuits, and so that for us is going to be the summation of the entire book, right? That God is going to use this incredibly graphic illustration in the flesh, in the language that the people can understand, to talk about the larger problem of God's people and what's going on in their actual hearts.

Prophets are always asked to do very, very difficult things. You'll see this summer as we go through each of the minor prophets that God is going to ask them to enact in the flesh, to act out in front of people what's going on spiritually in the people's hearts, and he's going to ask them to do a whole bunch of crazy things, but I think it's clear that Hosea kind of got the short straw, didn't he, right? He gets the hardest of all of them, and God tells Hosea to marry a prostitute who will cheat on him repeatedly. He asks him to have children with her and then continue to take her back despite her repeated unfaithfulness.

And all of this to give Israel this great metaphor that they cannot deny that is in the clearest language possible about what is going on internally with their own relationship with God. And it is, friends. It's a hard book to read if you haven't. I mean, a lot of us, when we think of Hosea, you're really just thinking about the first chapter or two, right? It's a longer book than that. It's a hard book to read, but we need to, because as we said in our call to worship this morning, we serve a God who does not change. He's not a different God today than he was the day that he spoke through Hosea. And our idolatrous hearts are still prone to wander, aren't they? God is still Hosea, and we are so often still his cheating wife.

So the passage is in your worship guide this morning. We're going to take, again, a summation passage here. It's going to be in the middle of the book, Hosea 4, 1 to 3, sort of a summary statement of everything that's going on in this book. Let's hear the word of the Lord together.

1 Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land;

2 there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed.

3 Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish, and also the beasts of the field and the birds of the heavens, and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

Says the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let's pray together.

Father, it's a heavy subject today, and even studying it, reading through it, preparing for this message all week, Lord, the message never got softer. This is a word that we need equally as much as Israel did. This is not just a story about people back then, Lord, but it's very much a story of us as well. Father, we pray that you would come today, that you would both comfort and you would convict, that you would lead us in grace and in truth, Lord. As always, Lord, we pray that if there is anything in here that I say today that is false, that it would just fall away. People wouldn't even remember it anymore. But what is true, Lord, what it is that you want to communicate to your people today that would move from our head to our hearts, that it actually would stick, Lord, that you would plant seeds there of faith and hope and love and of a future with you, that we would be a people who would leave here looking more like Jesus because we saw him lifted up in our midst today. In his name we pray. Amen.

Hosea has a great deal to say about betrayal, sort of a key theme throughout the entire book. I know personally that at least 50% of you here today, that probably the deepest wound in your life has to do with betrayal of some kind. And I know that because you've actually told me yourself. And I think the number would be much higher, probably much closer to 100% if I had the opportunity to hear from every single one of you. Sort of the nature of humanity. We've got betrayal from a parent or both of them. Betrayal from a close friend or a sibling. Betrayal of a spouse or a child. Betrayal from a pastor or a member of a church. Betrayal of someone you were dating or thought you were dating. Betrayal of an uncle or an aunt or an ant, as you say. Betrayals from an in-law, maybe the worst boss you have ever had in your life. Betrayal through divorce or adultery or an addiction, a lie, a rumor or a promise.

Betrayals are some of the most profound wounds that we will suffer in this lifetime. And this is what I wrestled with this week as I was pouring over these passages. Why is that? Have you ever stopped and asked yourself before, why is it? Why is it that betrayal hurts so much? Why is growing up in a broken home so much more painful than having a broken car? Why does a failed marriage inflict so much more pain than a failed business venture? Why is losing a friend always more shattering than losing a little money? Why is that? And there might be tons of reasons, sociologically and psychologically, but I think there is one reason above them all, that the book of Hosea makes abundantly clear. Quite simply, we were made for relationships by a relational God. We were not made by God to make money. We were not made by God to continue to have promotion after promotion in our careers. We were not made by God to make sure we were always driving flawlessly functioning cars. That wasn't our purpose. That wasn't His intent. And so when those things fall to pieces, we can weather the storm. It's not ultimate. It's not who we are. They're not at the most foundational level part of our being.

And so let me just introduce, it's a very fancy philosophical word. You don't have to remember it. It's not going to come up again, but there's no other way to say it. But there's this word ontology. I'm not sure if you've ever heard that before. The physical world we live in, it's the study of existence. Again, you don't have to remember it. But philosophers talk about humans, and they talk about us being ontologically relational. What does that mean? It means that as a people, our existence is tied to our relationship to others, not to things. That's who we are. And so when you think about how you describe yourself, it's almost always in relationship to other people. We think about being a son, or a daughter, or a spouse to this person, or we think about being a father, or a mother, or we even think about being a person who worships a certain God. Those are all relational kinds of languages and connections. We don't talk about it. In fact, if we do, if you meet somebody who primarily identifies themselves by the brand of car they drive, or their political choice, or their career, you say, oh, I think something went wrong there. We identify that, because we're relational people.

We were made to have relationships with one another.

We're created by a relational God, but since we are made by a relational God for the sole purpose of relationships, to love God and love people, when our relationships fall apart, we do too. We do too.

And so few places in the Bible make that more clear than this book of Hosea. God opens up his heart towards his people. Some of, again, the most clear and graphic language available to us to let us know that if we give our hearts away to any other God, any other God, when we put our trust in anything other than him, we are committing adultery. We are committing adultery. At the way we look at each of these books this summer, we'll take one book, as I said, and this week, as we look at Hosea, we'll talk about the cause of our disordered loves, the cure for our disordered loves, and the consequences in the middle there. So those three things, let's talk about the cause, let's talk about the consequences, and finally, the cure. That if that's the charge that God is bringing against us, a serious, serious charge, again, no less weighty for the people of Israel than it is for us today, let's take some time to think through it well.

So first, the cause.

Right at the very beginning of our passage today, you say, *hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.* That word controversy, right? When you read that, you might say, oh, it sounds like God's got a beef with the people, right? He's a little upset. Oh, they're having a fight, right? No, this is very, very strong language. This is judicial language. This is, in essence, God is saying through Hosea, this is God's case against you. He's bringing a formal case. Here is the charge that God is bringing against the people of Israel, right?

And so a prophet showing up in your town, ever, just so you know, heralding a message from God, it's always a concerning moment, right? Rarely is it for good, right? You've got a prophet showing up, but it is always an act of divine grace, always. How so? Because God does not discipline his children without warning them first and giving them a chance to repent. You'll see this. You'll see it again and again all summer long, through each of these minor prophets, God is going to say, here's my case, here's my charge, okay? Here's what I have against you right now, and here are the consequences if you refuse to repent, and here's what happens between you and I if you do repent and come back to me. It's a warning. It's a divine grace. The prophet is sent to declare God's charges, but God is always open and willing and hopeful that the people will confess and repent.

So what is the charge, okay? What is this entire book about, really, right? What is the charge?

First, he says, there is no faithfulness.

Charge number one. There's no faithfulness among my people. Later in Hosea, just after this passage, he's going to get even more specific. He says, my people inquire of a piece of wood, and their walking staff gives them oracles. They sacrifice on the tops of mountains, and they burn offerings on the hills. Your daughters play the whore, and your bride commits adultery. The men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes. It's that specific, right? He just lays it out. Here's the case. If you want examples, this is what's going on among my people.

These are dark, dark days for the people of Israel. They had physical idols made of wood, stone. They would actually take some of the items from the temple itself that were gold and silver, and they would actually melt them down to create other gods to worship from the temple of Yahweh. They had two foreign gods primarily that they chased after, Baal, the Canaanite god of weather and agriculture. They believed that he controlled all of the crops and the rain and the livestock, and Ashtaroth, the goddess of fertility and love and war. They carved idols. They made sacrifices. They obviously participated in temple prostitution. And more importantly, I want you to recognize the vivid language God uses to describe their idolatry later in chapter four. He says,

v.12 for a spirit of whoredom has led them astray, and they have left their God to play the whore.

That's God speaking. Friends, I know that is an incredibly offensive word. And I think that's the point God is making. That's why God keeps using it. And it's not only because their pursuit of other gods often takes some sort of sexual immorality form, but it's because God is a covenantal God, whose primary relationship with his people is characterized by love and loyalty, and what his people have done is turned it into nothing more than a transaction. That's what they're doing. And so whatever they can't get from God, they feel totally justified to run after these other ones and say, well, maybe I'll get some from that god. I'll get some from that god. And yes, when I need you, God, I'll get it from you too.

And he says, that is just like sexual immorality, right? No commitment, no covenant, no love, no trust in our relationship. Just let me get mine out of this. And he says, you're treating me the same exact way. And despite God's faithfulness to Israel, they are utterly faithless. Jumping into bed as it was with any and every god who promises to give them what they want. Crops, fertility, material blessings, rain, power, whatever the heart desires.

He says, in addition to your faithlessness, he said, there is no love.

There is no steadfast love.

He uses that word specifically. We've talked about that so many times, appears again and again all throughout the scriptures, a very specific word, *hesed* love. It is sacrificial love. It is a sacrificial love, a love that costs something. As one scholar famously put it, a love that costs everything given to someone who deserves nothing. *Hesed* love.

And what God is saying here is the people of Israel are unwilling, unwilling to love him with that kind of love, a love that would deny themselves anything, cost them anything to follow God, right? They will follow their lust. They will follow their appetites. They will follow every single desire they have. It will all be fulfilled. And they assume on God's grace. It is a cheap, cheap grace. It's a grace without obedience. It's a grace without faithfulness. It is a grace without any cost at all. It's the very opposite of the kind of love that God has for his people, a promise-keeping covenantal love that costs him everything, everything, including as Hosea shows us, enduring the humiliation and the disloyalty of an adulterous people and still coming after them.

Finally, he says, they have no knowledge of God.

It's helpful the way that God describes us here. He's going to get even more specific and so it's not just the general idea that somehow they don't really understand who he is or they don't have enough biblical knowledge. It's more specific than that. God has, as it were, evidence. Here's my evidence he puts forward. He says, you don't believe me that you don't know who I am? Listen to how you are living, right? Their actions prove they don't know him. He says, *there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, committing adultery; they break all bounds, and bloodshed follows bloodshed. (v.2)*

And so this is the summation. This is everything that God is bringing against his people and I wonder if you can hear it, what God is saying to them, right? At the very, very beginning from the first two, like they are idolaters, right? They have other gods before him, obviously. They take his name in vain when they pray to him. It's totally transactional. And then he says, you bow down to idols. You swear, you lie, you steal, you murder, you commit adultery.

Does that list sound familiar, friends? He says, **you break all bounds**. You have systematically broken every single one of the Ten Commandments I gave you. At the very heart of this relationship, the agreement that we made in the Mosaic Covenant, right? That I would be your God, you would be my people and you have gone and systematically broken every single one of your promises. You treat me like a joke, God says. The vows you made to me are obviously meaningless, just like they are to a spouse who promises faithfulness and refuses to stop cheating.

Your actions speak louder than your words.

Again, friends, I can't say this enough. I don't like that metaphor any more than you do, right? Deeply uncomfortable to be called an adulterer by God himself. And I've told you, I've shared this before, right? That it's not like we live with our heads in the sands, right? We have walked with a number of families through adultery in this last year. It is an emotional gut punch, right? It unravels people.

If you're here today and adultery is part of your story, you know exactly what I'm talking about. It changes everything. And that's incredibly hard to say, but

God himself is telling Israel and telling us, when you chase after other idols, when you turn back and you give your affections to another god, you have cheated on me. You're an adulterer.

And what I want you to understand clearly is that this case God is bringing against his people, it is a mercy on them.

As hard as it is for us to hear that, and maybe as much in our own minds that we are saying like, well, that probably is true about some other people, but my sin isn't quite like that, right? I'm not actually going after other gods, right? I don't have an idol up on that. And God is saying like, no, that's not the way it works.

It's that at the desire level of your heart, I am not all yours and you are not all mine.

I have competitors. And it's a mercy that God is showing us this today. It's a mercy that God went to the people in Hosea's time. Because one of the most shocking things to see and experience as a pastor is how shocked someone is by the consequences of their sin. It's shocking. That if they were completely unaware that like, hey, I knew what I was doing was wrong, and yet I ran straight through that sign, and now I can't believe what's happening to me.

When we're confessing and maybe when we're exposed and we're finally caught, our first reaction to suggest that, hey, hey, hey, the consequences are unfair. This is too much. This is too harsh. This is too ungracious. But when we respond that way, what it typically reveals in our own heart is just how far in the justification process we had gotten. We had justified ourselves so many times in this habitual sin that we are actually astonished to find out that our sin has any kind of consequence whatsoever, that it wrecks things.

We've lost sight of just how far we had run from God.

And what Hosea reminds us, and what I want to remind you today is that there is a good chance that this is going on right now in our own lives, that God is bringing a case, God has brought a case, that there is something in your life right now which God has put his finger on, and it is a divine mercy, right? That before the discipline comes, before all of the consequences fall on your head, God is shining a light on it, just like he did to the people of Hosea. And he's saying, pay attention to this. You don't see this right now, but I'm telling you, this is gonna destroy your life. What you're doing is sin, turn back.

Cause you know, I've never met with anybody who has been caught in sin before that looked across from me and said, you know what, I'm so glad you're telling me this. I actually had no idea that that was sinful, right? I've never heard that before. The problem was they just never believed they would be disciplined for it. There would be any consequences somehow. Chances are good that God has that finger on some part of your life right now.

And the message of Hosea and the message to all of us is respond, right? What Hosea is warning all of us today is if the Lord has brought a charge against you, pay attention people, pay attention. It's a warning. And as God's gonna show the people of Israel, he doesn't bluff folks. In fact, he's clear about the consequences of the continued rebellion. So let's talk about those.

What are the consequences?

He calls out Hosea for these sins. He says, here's my case against you. And if you do not turn your heart back to me, if you do not repent, here are the consequences. He says,

therefore the land mourns and all who dwell in it languish. And also the beasts of the field, the birds of the heaven, even the fish of the sea are taken away. (v.3)

Is it not incredibly, incredibly interesting that the very first consequence that God lays out for the people of Israel is that the land mourns? The land. After all of this relational language, all of this kind of analogy, all of a sudden he says, here's the consequences, the land is gonna mourn, right? The birds, the beasts, the fish, all of them are gonna pay.

I think what God is showing us and what we so often forget, what we try to remind you of when we do the confession of sin together is that the consequences of our sin are pervasive. Way more pervasive than we think, right? When you sin, when I sin, we're not the only ones who suffer the consequences. If you're married, your spouse suffers. If you have kids, your kids suffer. Pretty soon other people in your circle, right? It's your friends, it's your coworkers, it's your neighbors. They all suffer because of your sin and my sin. And you can be certain that your sin will affect everyone in your church, right? It's why one, historically always, one of the marks of a healthy church is to practice church discipline, right? Because sins are never as isolated. They always affect every single one of us. Every single one of us who sins affects every single one of us. We are a body, right? We are intimately connected. We are interwoven into each other's life. We take vows to one another. When one of us falls, we all suffer. We all do.

That's why here in Hosea, you know who gets the lion's share of God's anger? Again, we're not gonna go through the whole book. You've got to get it all today. But who is gonna get God's pinpointed ire again and again? It's the priests. That's who he goes after. In particular, because they said nothing and they let the people just keep on committing adultery against God. God's now holding them accountable for their passivity.

And so how far does this destructive influence of sin extend? It extends to everyone and everything. It spreads like a cancer. *The beasts of the field, the birds of the heaven, even the fish of the sea are taken away.* As one commentator said, that nature testifies to the sin in the land for it has been made to suffer on account of the sins of man. Paul talks about that. We went through that passage in Romans that even the earth groans, creation groans because it suffers the consequences of the fall. And the sins of God people are so widespread, it makes the very land that they are living on sick with drought and famine and eventual death of everything. Even the animals suffer because of our sin. Cosmic, cosmic damage being done by God's people.

What could possibly be the cure to something that disastrous?

Again, we're gonna go through the whole book today. If you're interested, part of the cure begins to come. The light begins to shine a little bit later on in chapter 11. God says,

I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and injustice and steadfast love and mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord.

Repeated words again, right? Repeated words, betrothed. God's offer to the adultery of his people is marriage. The entire story of Hosea, that horrible calling that no prophet ever asked for, it was a living word picture of the hesed, steadfast, covenantal love of God. Sacrificial love that comes at such enormous cost. God's willingness to take back the adulterer, to take back the prostitute, to take back the faithless and the cheater and the idol worshiper and the sinner, to take us back, to take me back, to take you back. And friends, to put all of those pieces together for us today.

The only way that God is able to forgive an adulterer and still be a just God is for someone to pay the penalty of our betrayal. That someone who elects to pay it is God's only son.

Our brother Jesus tells the Father, he will pay the price. And when Jesus is heading to Golgotha, when he's taking the sins of the world on himself, it says *that for the joy set before him, he endured the cross.* The joy. And what is that joy, friends? Christ's reward, the father gives him the church as his bride.

Again and again, we can't get away from this language of adultery, of marriage, of covenant, of promise, of the bride and the groom. A church that is now washed by his blood, radiant, beautiful, without stain or blemish, the adulterer is now called faithful. That's what it means when the Bible says it is because of God's kindness that we repent. It's God's kindness that we come back to him.

God's judgment is not the motivation for us to turn back to him. It is the consequences of refusing to.

Let me say that again, right? God's judgment is not the motivation for us turning back to him. It is the consequences for not doing that. The Book of Hosea is a warning, turn back, stop, confess, repent, the motivation God gives is not the fear of his retribution. It's not how the book should be read. It is the promise of his love again and again and again. He says, when Israel was a child, I loved him. Out of Egypt, I called my son, but the more they were called, the more they went away from me. They sacrificed to the Baals, they burned incense to images. It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking him by the arms. They did not realize it was I who healed them. He says, I led them with cords of human kindness in ties of love. That's what I was doing. He says to them, I was like one who lifts a child to the cheek and I bent down to feed them. Therefore, behold, I will allure her, bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her.

God's speaking to us, to his people. The word picture speaks for itself, right? It is this glorious imagery that all of us can imagine in our mind, the imagery of a tender father who lifts his child up to his cheek to feed it. A father who lovingly cares for the child, feeds it, gently holds their hands while they're learning to walk between his feet. And the response of this child is to be totally unaware of who it was who raised him, loved them, cared for them, and they run off into the arms of other lovers. And he lets her go. He lets her go with this hope that after she has exhausted herself, after you've gone, after you've chased after it, and you go out to the world, you go see what's out there, that after all of that, after she has tried the world and she has been left beaten, depressed, addicted, and lost, he says, therefore, behold, I will allure her. At that moment, I will come to her again. I will bring her into the wilderness. I will speak tenderly to her. And when she is filthy and unfaithful, God says, I will take that betrayer by the hand and I will woo her. I will win her back.

Do you ever hear God speaking to you tenderly like that?

Is that what his voice sounds like to you?

Or is his voice in your head only ever anger and disappointment and frustration?

Many of you are probably familiar of the book by Francine Rivers called Redeeming Love. Famous book, became a movie as well. Really a modern retelling of the Book of Hosea. Pretty famous. One line in particular from that book, the man who plays the part of Hosea is talking to his bride who plays the part of Gomer, and he says, my love isn't a weapon, it's a lifeline. Love is the way back into Eden.

The writer says, she thought she had been saved by his love for her, and in part she had been. It had cleansed her, never casting blame, but that had only been the beginning. It was loving him in return that had brought her out of darkness.

God wants a response from us. And I get it, as I read through this manuscript the other day and was thinking through this sermon, looking at the particular language of it, I know there's a demographic of folks here today that this sermon is hard to hear. We call those people thinkers, right? Not feelers, right? Maybe all this talk of love and marriage and metaphors, God wooing people, right? It's difficult, doesn't land with everybody. Maybe it's a bit much, but I would say this, I've spent over the last 20 years in pastoral ministry, meeting with folks, men and women from all walks of life, different stages of life, and I can't tell you how many of those people have met with me to tell me about the scars. Scars they carry because of their fathers, right? They were absent, addicted, abusive. Just how many of them had broken down in tears in front of me. As they talked in that moment, they said, what would it mean to me? What would it change about my life if I ever once knew at the bottom of my heart that my father loved me? Every single person, you don't have to be a feeler to understand that.

What it would have meant to hear that they were loved, that they were someone he was proud of, that they were a gift worth defending at all cost. I don't think there's a single person in this room that says I don't need that in my life.

Every single one of us carries in us at our very core a desire to be loved, to be known at our worst moments and loved all the way to the bottom by somebody. Friends, that doesn't make you soft, that just makes you human, it's human. God put it there, that we were created by a relational God for relationships, that's why we're here. And what God offers us so much more than what we settle for, isn't it? Again and again and again His love extends to us, he makes the first move, he redeems, he forgives, he cleanses, and his love reaches towards us, invites us deeper in, higher up, all the time. And you can stay in the shallows or you can take him up at his offer.

And friends, what the story of Hosea reminds us is that no matter how stained your story is, no matter how stained your story has been, he is Hosea. And we are his bride of which he is paying the cost of our redemption and says to us, I will betroth you to me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord.

It is not just his love towards us that lifts us out of darkness, but our response of that love towards him.

God does not want just your mental assent. Doesn't want you to know that you know the right ideas, you have the right theology, you know the right words to talk about him. He wants your heart. He wants you. And so today, together, we listen to his charge, we wrestle with the consequences, and God calls us forward to come, respond to the cure instead.

Let's pray together.

Oh, gracious Father, it's a hard word. It's a hard word, but a beautiful word, Lord God, that you are the unchanging one, that you are the one that continually comes after us, wooing us, drawing us back to yourself, Lord God, and I pray for us today that as we wrestle with the truth of the gospel, Father, that today we would believe. That we would take you at your word, Lord, that we would recognize that it is not your judgment and your wrath and your anger that draws us to yourself, but it is your tenderness, it is your love, it is your grace, it is your forgiveness, Lord, that forever you are standing before us as the husband calling back the adulterous wife, Lord. Father, that we might take you up on that offer today. Run towards you, Lord God. See that the love that you offer is infinitely greater than anything that our idols are promising us. We have tried it all, Lord, and we've been found wanting with all of it. Father, give us the courage, Lord. Give us your grace and your mercy to turn back and embrace you alone. Pray you would do it in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

****Portion of scripture read before sermon—James 4:1-5**