

“Chasing True Love”

Good morning, Grace!

CHINESE: Now there are a lot of symbols for Valentine’s Day. You’ve got the heart, the cards, candy, flowers, and cupid. But how about this one?

Chinese! One of the Cleveland family traditions has been to get Chinese on Valentine’s Day and celebrate at home (explain why we don’t like to go out expensive with our kids). Anybody in here like some Sushi? General Tso? Rice? Wonton Soup? Egg rolls?

But we all know the best part of the Chinese Meal is the Fortune Cookie, right? Where else can you get chicken and rice and a thought that will make your life nice all for \$10.99?

FUNNY FORTUNES: Sometimes the fortunes are deep sometimes they’re silly. But mostly they’re just empty. We found a few you might get a laugh from this week. How about these:

“Though I am not naturally honest, I am so sometimes by chance.”

Here’s one I saw a guy from Grace post on Facebook this week after enjoying a Chinese buffet: *“Moderate your appetite so that with a little you may be content.”* A little late, huh?

And then there’s: *“You need a mint. Like, bad.”* Never pass down that advice!

One more – the prophetic fortune that reads, *“You will be hungry again in one hour.”*

That’s the problem with Chinese food. You eat a ton of rice and you’re full but then like an hour later you could eat a Burger and fries. It’s not satisfying – it’s empty.

Really fortunes inside the cookie are simply empty promises. We don’t actually expect what they say to come true. But some of us live our lives like we’re cracking open a fortune cookie every day. Let me give you some common fortunes we believe:

Fortune 1: *“Being productive will make you happy.”*

By the look of the pace of our lives today you would think we were called human doings not human beings. Productivity has become a barometer for determining your day. Maybe you struggle with having to be productive no matter what it does to the people around you. Perhaps you confuse who you are with what you accomplish. Or you struggle when others succeed.

Productivity is an empty promise. Here’s another one:

Fortune 2: *“When he/she approves then you’ll be happy.”*

It's so easy to fall into a trap of expecting relationships to give our lives meaning. And when we do get what we expect from people our lives tailspin. Seeking approval will exhaust you and eventually will disappoint you. When you're pursuing approval you basically give your heart up for adoption.

Approval is an empty promise. Here's another one:

Fortune 3: *"If I get my way then I'll be happy."*

We all want power. Don't believe me? Ever wish you had Jedi-like ability when the car in front of you is slow? We want a promotion and when we don't get it we do a behind-the-scenes crusade against the person who did. We're angry because we're still single. We're angry because we don't have what we think we deserve. There might not be a more potent or powerful drug than power. When someone believes this empty promise and they find out their power has limits everyone suffers.

Power is an empty promise. How about one more?

Fortune 4: *"If I look good then I'll be happy."*

TV, movies, magazines, advertisements, social media bombard us daily with the same empty promise of image. The perfect body. The polished image. The right looks. Do you have a hard time concentrating if you don't feel like you look your best?

Perhaps someone in here is confused into thinking that how you look is who you are. Beauty is fleeting and an empty promise.

Image is an empty promise. Power is an empty promise. Approval is an empty promise. Productivity is an empty promise.

TENSION: We pursue real love but settle for bad romance. We can try and substitute something in God's place in our lives but substitutes never satisfy.

STORY: In our story from the book of Hosea remember God asks a prophet to marry a prostitute to paint a strong picture of His love for us. Hosea's love for Gomer is paralleled to God's love for His people. We all expect a traditional love story but this marriage is anything but that. We found a modern day version of what it might have been like for these two. Watch this:

The devastation Hosea must have felt as Gomer returned to prostitution and their marriage in shambles. In Hosea 2 we read:

"Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. ³ Otherwise I will strip her naked and make her as bare as on the day she was born; I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst. ⁴ I will not show my love to her children, because they are the children of adultery. ⁵ Their mother has been

unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, ‘I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink.’” – Hosea 2:2-5

Gomer turns her back on the man who loved her and instead runs into the arms of imitators and manipulators.

WAIT & SEE: It’s just like my kids. They do not want to wait. They want what they want right now. Will there be school tomorrow dad? Wait and see. Can we go to the toy store? Wait and see. Can we go sledding? Wait and see. When they get the wait and see response they quickly get irritated and often rebel from me. Sound familiar?

Gomer believes an empty promise because it sold her on a brighter and better future. All of us can fall for that lie. That’s the point today. Write this down:

We start seeking the promise of a false god when we stop sensing the presence of the real God.

Gomer saw what she thought was a better future. Instead what she got was a bad romance. God’s people were notorious for turning to other things in search of what only God can deliver. It’s recorded all over the book of Hosea.

“I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips;” – Hosea 2:17

“My people consult a wooden idol, and a diviner’s rod speaks to them. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God.” – Hosea 4:12

“With their silver and gold they make idols for themselves to their own destruction.” – Hosea 8:4

“Now they sin more and more; they make idols for themselves from their silver, cleverly fashioned images, all of them the work of craftsmen.” – Hosea 13:2

An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our heart. It causes us to believe that God cannot be trusted with our future and we must act on our own behalf to secure our well-being. We can make idols out of jobs, houses, cars, people, sports, music, entertainment, church, kids, etc.

The more distant God seems the more appealing our idols become. There’s no doubt in my mind that everyone in this room myself included can struggle with idols. Idols can be great things. But they cannot deliver what God promises. And when we do not sense God’s presence we quickly buy another gods promise.

Listen our dreams no matter how wonderful they may be will always make a lousy god. We are all pursuing love but settling for a cheap bad romance instead. Whenever what you are pursuing to give you what only God can give you fails, you move onto the next thing.

FLUSHING: It reminds me of when our oldest son was going through the flushing stage. Did your kids go through this? It was exciting for him to drop a toy in the toilet, press down on the handle, and watch it swirl around. We had a plumber come in and pull some of the most amazing toys out of that toilet. I was fully expecting him to pull out the Lego Star Wars Millennium Force! I was like, how does that stuff get down there?

Anyway, one time it was quiet in the house (parents, you know, too quiet). So I ventured to find my son who was in the bathroom. And he was about to flush a toy down the toilet when he saw me. And you know what he was thinking “Is it worth it?” Know how I know that? He’s MY son!

It was a real temptation for him. To flush or not to flush. When he didn’t sense the presence of His dad He was tempted with the promise of the toilet.

We all have things in our lives that we know shouldn’t be there. We do things we know we shouldn’t do. But we do them anyway. We are unfaithful to God.

STORY: BUT, this is the amazing part. God still wants us. God pursues me with passion in spite of my problems. Just like you and I discover our idols don’t deliver Gomer is finding out her dream has turned to a nightmare. That’s where it gets good.

TRANS: If someone cheats on us or lies to us we’d be like “that’s it, enough! I’m done with you!” Not our God. In her worst moment Gomer discovers 2 aspects of Hosea’s love that teach us about God’s love. First we see...

God’s love is PATIENT

God’s love is so different than our love. We love each other if, because, and when. If someone doesn’t meet the standards of our love, doesn’t come through for us, doesn’t love us the way we think they should, then we withdraw and our love grows cold.

But God’s love is in a total different category. His love is completely undeserved. God loves in spite of. Look at verse 14,

“Therefore I am now going to allure her...” – Hosea 2:14a

This phrase is awesome. Hosea pursues Gomer (at her worst) with a soft, tender, persuasion. It’s a romantic term that we might interpret today as charming or wooing her back.

At your worst God is going to pull out a powerful love that is enticing. It’s a love that acts as an solvent scrubbing off the false

beliefs you've tattooed on your heart and replace them with the real thing – His love for you.

It's crazy to think why Hosea sticks with Gomer. You might think he's just a henpecked weak man. But that's not the case at all. He simply loves her too much to abandon her to her own bad choices. That takes a real strength...more than the strength of Romeo, Don Juan, Mr. Darcy, or Rhett Butler wrapped into one.

He wants to fulfill the emptiness inside us with a love that will cause all our idols to fall by the wayside.

PATIENT:

Peter told us that,

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” – 2 Peter 3:9

TRANS: God's love is patient. There's a second aspect of His love revealed in this chapter. Even at our worst...

God's love is POWERFUL

God knows His people have been unfaithful. He's not lessening the fact that they've sinned. He doesn't over look sin. It's a big

deal to Him. But His love is more powerful than our sin. Look at verse 16,

“In that day,” declares the Lord, “you will call me ‘my husband’; you will no longer call me ‘my master.’¹⁷ I will remove the names of the Baals from her lips; no longer will their names be invoked.” – Hosea 2:16-17

GOSPEL: This is a cool promise. The phrase “in that day” is about the future. It links what God is starting in His people back in Hosea's day to what God did through His Son Jesus - in His birth, death, and resurrection.

The Bible tells us that God demonstrated us love for us that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Jesus' death on the cross was to pay for our sins. That is real love. It's powerful because it changes us. First,

God's love changes my identity. In Christ our relationship with God changes status. He pursues to change the way you view you. In chapter 1 Gomer's children are called “not my people” and “not loved”. In chapter 2 they are called “my people” and “my loved one” (2:1). He also pursues to change the way you view Him.

God is shifting our attention from a legal affiliation (master) to an intimate relationship (husband). Choosing to receive that forgiveness and love changes your relationship with God. He says ‘you will call me husband, not master.’ That's huge.

God's love is powerful enough to change my identity but,

God's love changes my destiny.

The more we understand God's love the less inclined we are to give our attention to alternatives. I think some of you believe you've moved beyond God's love or that somehow God's love is elementary. Nothing grounds us, sustains us, or keeps us going beyond God's love.

All throughout the Bible God's love is depicted through transformation stories. It's not just what we were rescued from, but also what we were rescued to! God is pursuing you from something and for something.

We are pursued from death for life. Some people think Jesus provides a little niceness to life. Like He's some sort of spiritual air freshener to help you smell better. God isn't trying to make good people better. He is taking dead people and bringing them back to life. His love is powerful enough to bring what is dead back to life. (Romans 4:17).

We are pursued from orphan status for adoption. God adopted us knowing who we are and how we act. God adopted us knowing our faults, failings, and weaknesses. He isn't worried because His love is powerful enough to overcome our weaknesses and our failures.

TRANS: God's love is patient and powerful. The book of Hosea reveals that to us.

CONCLUSION

LES MISERABLES: One of the greatest movies ever made is Les Miserables, based on the book by Victor Hugo. Jean Valjean constantly gives grace to people around him because he first received grace from an old priest who saved his life in spite of the fact he had stolen from him.

Valjean extends grace to Fantine a single mother who loses her job and is forced into prostitution to support her daughter. One evening after she is beaten by a group of men Valjean takes her to a safe place and cares for her. Fantine asks, "Why are you being so kind?" She of course thinks he wants what all the other men wanted. "You don't understand I'm a whore and my daughter has no father."

Valjean responds with these powerful words: "She has the Lord. He is her father, and you are his creation. In His eyes you have never been anything but an innocent and beautiful woman."

We see ourselves as we are, but he sees us for what we can become through His love.

In fact, God's love is so powerful it sweets us off our feet and makes us forget all about those counterfeit loves with empty

promises we once pursued. I believe conquering your idols and habitual sins is ultimately a matter of being swept up by His love rather than gritting our teeth and trying harder.

I believe God is able to meet our deepest needs. He is not a myth. He is not abstract or an idea. He is not a trend. He is real. He made everything that is. He stands above time, space, and history. What seems impossible to me isn't remotely difficult for Him.

He's not an empty promise. He's the real thing. That means you don't have to live in fear. You don't have to live in defeat or in search of something to heal the hurt or fill the empty places in your life. God is able to do that.

He is able to reconcile a broken marriage. He is able to liberate people from a horrible addiction. He is able to forgive the darkest of sins. He is able to provide for your most urgent need. He is exactly what you've been searching for your entire life. He is what you've been pursuing!

RESPONSES (GOSPEL, IDOLS)