

Homiletics Analysis: Hosea 6

Content & Intent

Broader Unit (Hosea 4–7 as a covenant lawsuit cycle): Hosea 4–7 forms a sustained covenant indictment of Israel and Judah. Hosea 4 establishes the charge: there is no faithfulness, no steadfast love (*hesed*), no knowledge of God in the land. Hosea 5 narrows the indictment to the leaders — priests, king, and princes — who have multiplied the people’s sin rather than remedied it. Hosea 7 documents the specific corruptions of Israel’s political and moral life: adultery, wine, treachery, empty cries to heaven. Hosea 6 occupies the hinge position: it begins with what sounds like a call to repentance (vv. 1–3), followed immediately by God’s devastating evaluation of that repentance (vv. 4–6), and closes with a catalogue of specific covenant violations that prove the evaluation (vv. 7–11). The broader unit’s claim is that Israel’s covenant faithlessness is not a surface problem requiring a surface remedy — it goes to the level of the heart’s orientation toward God.

This Text — Content: Hosea 6 moves in three clear stages. First (vv. 1–3), the people speak what appears to be a call to corporate repentance: “Come, let us return to the LORD.” The language is liturgically fluent — it names the LORD as the one who has struck and will heal, and it anticipates His arrival “like rain.” Second (vv. 4–6), God responds — and the response is not welcome. He addresses Ephraim and Judah directly: their *hesed* (steadfast love, loyalty) is like morning mist and early dew — it evaporates. Therefore God has cut at them through the prophets and slain them by the words of His mouth, because He desires *hesed* and the knowledge of God rather than sacrifice and burnt offerings. Third (vv. 7–11), God catalogues the specific violations that prove His evaluation: Adam (or “at Adam”) broke the covenant; Gilead is a city of evildoers; priests murder on the road to Shechem; the house of Israel has committed harlotry. Judah faces a harvest of judgment. The chapter is tightly structured around a single diagnostic pivot: the people know the liturgical form of return but lack the covenant substance — *hesed* — that would make their return real.

This Text — Intent: God is seeking to strip Israel (and every subsequent reader) of the illusion that religious fluency substitutes for covenant loyalty. The people can speak the right words about the LORD’s healing and His coming like rain, but God sees through the words to the thing beneath: a *hesed* as thin and transient as morning dew. The intent is not merely to indict but to expose — to surface the gap between formal religion and genuine covenant relationship so that the reader cannot remain comfortable in religious performance. God’s declaration in verse 6 (“I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings”) is not an abolition of the cult but a diagnosis of the heart condition that makes the cult hollow. The effect God is seeking to produce is self-examination that moves below the surface of religious behavior to ask: Is my loyalty to God real and durable, or does it evaporate when it costs something?

Subject Sentence: Israel's religious fluency cannot substitute for the covenant loyalty God actually requires.

Primary Claim: God exposes the fatal gap between Israel's liturgically correct repentance and the durable *hesed* He actually desires — confronting every reader with the question of whether their religion is real or merely evaporating.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity and nature of the repentance speech (vv. 1–3): The central interpretive question is whether verses 1–3 represent genuine repentance that God nevertheless finds inadequate, superficial repentance that sounds genuine but lacks substance, or something else entirely (a liturgical formula the people have rehearsed without moral seriousness). Lutheran exposition tends toward the first reading — the people are genuinely crying out, but the Law has not yet done its full work; the problem is insufficiency of the penitential act. Wesleyan/Arminian reading often emphasizes human responsibility: the people *could* produce genuine *hesed* if they would fully surrender; the problem is incomplete consecration. Dispensational readings sometimes treat verses 1–3 as a future prophetic repentance — Israel's eschatological turning at the end of the age — reading “the third day” (v. 2) as a reference to Israel's future national resurrection after a period of tribulation.

The Reformed reading follows the internal logic of God's response in verses 4–6 most closely. God's question — “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?” — is a lament, not a question awaiting a better-quality answer. The response “your *hesed* is like a morning cloud” is God's evaluation of the speech in verses 1–3. The speech is not inadequate repentance that needs deepening; it is *substitute* repentance — the form of return without its substance. The people know what returning to the LORD sounds like, and they can produce the words. What they cannot produce is the durable covenant loyalty that would make the words mean something. This reading is confirmed by the catalogue in verses 7–11: these are people simultaneously capable of liturgical eloquence and covenant atrocity.

The Dispensational “third day” reading: The reading that “after two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up” (v. 2) refers to Israel's future national resurrection is not without canonical resonance — Paul alludes to this verse in 1 Corinthians 15:4 in connection with Christ's resurrection “on the third day according to the Scriptures” — but it misreads the rhetorical function of verses 1–3 in the chapter. These words are part of the problem, not part of the solution. They are Israel speaking with confident liturgical expectation — “he will revive us... he will raise us up... he will come to us like rain” —

precisely the transient, presumptuous optimism that God then devastates. Treating verses 1–3 as prophetically predictive of genuine future repentance requires reading against the grain of God’s immediate response. The Reformed reading acknowledges the canonical Christological resonance of verse 2 (Christ’s resurrection was indeed on the third day, and this language contributes to the scriptural substrate Paul cites) while refusing to reduce the passage’s rhetorical function to prophecy. The verse functions both as part of Israel’s presumptuous liturgical speech and, in the canon as a whole, as part of the language pattern God will fulfill beyond Israel’s comprehension.

“I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice” (v. 6) — abolition or reorientation? A frequent misreading (cutting across multiple traditions) treats verse 6 as a prophetic abolition of the sacrificial system — a proto-Reformational rejection of external religion in favor of internal sincerity. This reading appears in liberal Protestant exposition and, in a different register, in some Baptist emphases on the inward transformation of the believer as the true worship. The Reformed reading refuses this dichotomy. God is not contrasting inward with outward, or spiritual with ceremonial. He is diagnosing the condition that makes the outward observance hollow: a heart that has disconnected the sacrificial form from the covenant loyalty (*hesed*) the form was designed to express and seal. This reading is confirmed by the parallel: “the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” Knowledge of God (*da’at ’elohim*) in Hosea is not intellectual knowledge but covenantal intimacy — the relational reality that the cult is meant to embody and renew. The problem is not the burnt offering; it is the worshipper who brings it with evaporating loyalty and no genuine knowledge of the One to whom it is offered.

Verdict: The Reformed reading — that Hosea 6 exposes the substitution of religious fluency for genuine covenant loyalty, diagnoses the *hesed*-deficit that makes Israel’s religion hollow, and does so as an act of prophetic surgery that is ultimately merciful — best accounts for the chapter’s structure, God’s lament in verse 4, the specific charge in verse 6, and the catalogue of violations in verses 7–11. The Dispensational reading of verse 2 as eschatological prophecy, while not without canonical grounding, misreads the rhetorical function of the repentance speech within the chapter. The liberal Protestant abolition-of-cult reading misunderstands the diagnostic point of verse 6.

Key Canonical Support

- **Matthew 9:13; 12:7** — Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6 twice, directly applying it to Pharisaic religion: those who strain at gnats while missing *hesed* are doing exactly what Hosea diagnosed. This canonical citation confirms the Reformed reading that verse 6 addresses the displacement of heart-loyalty by religious form, not the abolition of external worship.
- **1 Samuel 15:22** — “To obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.” Samuel’s word to Saul establishes the same diagnostic principle a century before Hosea: God’s requirement is covenant loyalty expressed in obedience, not

religious performance that substitutes for it. This text and Hosea 6:6 form a mutually reinforcing testimony across the prophetic and historical writings.

- **Isaiah 1:10–17** — God’s address to Israel as “rulers of Sodom” despite their full sacrificial program: “I have had enough of burnt offerings... your hands are full of blood.” Isaiah’s expanded indictment of Israel’s hollow worship provides the canonical complement to Hosea’s more compressed diagnosis; together they establish that the prophetic tradition consistently exposes the gap between cultic performance and covenant reality.
- **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — The new covenant promise: “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts.” The *hesed*-deficit Hosea diagnoses — the evaporating loyalty that no amount of sacrifice repairs — is precisely what the new covenant addresses. God’s remedy for the problem Hosea exposes is not better-quality human religion but the internal transformation of the heart that only new covenant grace produces.
- **Mark 12:28–34** — The scribe who hears Jesus affirm the two great commandments acknowledges that loving God and neighbor “is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Jesus confirms: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” The *hesed* and knowledge-of-God that Hosea demanded find their fulfillment-definition in Christ’s summary of the law — and the scribe’s recognition that the scribe places him near, not inside, the kingdom gestures at the gap Hosea mapped.

Aim: To confront the reader with the specific gap between religious competence and covenant loyalty, so that they examine whether their relationship with God has *hesed* at its center or merely its verbal form.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
6:1	The people call one another to return to the LORD, identifying Him as the one who has torn and who will heal, who has struck down and who will bind up	Opening of the repentance speech; the logic is confident — God struck, so God will restore; liturgically fluent but note the absence of confession of specific sin
6:2	Confident expectation of revival “after two days” and raising up “on the third day” so that they may live before Him	The “third day” language enters Scripture here; in context, this is corporate optimism about speedy restoration; canonical

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		resonance with Christ's resurrection (1 Cor. 15:4) does not eliminate the presumptuous quality in context
6:3	Call to "know" (yada') the LORD; His coming is as certain as the dawn, like rain, like the spring rain that waters the earth	<i>Da'at YHWH</i> — covenant knowledge/intimacy; the agricultural imagery of rain is powerfully appropriate given Hosea's context in a land dependent on rain; the irony is that they use the language of knowing without the reality
6:4	God responds: "What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?" Their <i>hesed</i> is like morning mist, like early dew that disappears	The pivot of the chapter; God's lament, not anger alone — the rhetorical question expresses divine grief at the gap between what He hears and what is there; "morning mist" and "dew" — beautiful but evanescent, gone by mid-morning
6:5	Therefore God has hewn them by the prophets, slain them by the words of His mouth; His judgment goes forth like light	The prophetic word is the instrument of divine surgery; the word that diagnoses also wounds; "light" — inescapable, exposing
6:6	"For I desire <i>hesed</i> and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings"	The theological center of the chapter and one of the most significant prophetic summaries in the Old Testament; Jesus quotes this twice (Matt. 9:13; 12:7); <i>hesed</i> = covenant loyalty, steadfast love, loving-kindness; <i>da'at 'elohim</i> = relational knowing of God, not intellectual data
6:7	"But like Adam they	The "Adam" reference:

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me”	either a place name (a city in the Jordan Valley, cf. Josh. 3:16) or a reference to Adam in the garden; either reading grounds Israel’s betrayal in a deep pattern of covenant-breaking; the “there” may favor the geographical reading
6:8	Gilead is a city of evildoers, tracked with blood	Gilead east of the Jordan; the specific charge of bloodshed; violence and religious failure are paired throughout Hosea
6:9	As robbers lie in wait, so a band of priests murders on the road to Shechem, committing atrocities	The leaders appointed to guard and teach the covenant are themselves covenant assassins; this connects to Hosea 5’s indictment of the priests; Shechem was a Levitical city and city of refuge — priests committing murder on the road to a city of refuge is pointed irony
6:10	In the house of Israel God has seen a horrible thing; harlotry is there, Israel is defiled	Spiritual harlotry (covenant unfaithfulness/idolatry) and likely physical harlotry connected to cultic prostitution; the two forms of the same covenant violation
6:11	“For you also, O Judah, a harvest is appointed. When I restore the fortunes of my people”	The chapter closes with a dual note: judgment (harvest of wrath) appointed for Judah; and the first hint of future restoration (“when I restore”) — a seed of hope that Hosea will develop in chapters 11 and 14

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	6:1–3	The People’s Speech: Liturgically Fluent, Covenantally Hollow
2	6:4–6	God’s Diagnosis: <i>Hesed</i> That Evaporates Is Not <i>Hesed</i>
3	6:7–11	The Evidence: Covenant Violations That Prove the Diagnosis

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel’s religious fluency cannot substitute for the covenant loyalty God actually requires.

Primary Claim: God exposes the fatal gap between Israel’s liturgically correct repentance and the durable *hesed* He actually desires — confronting every reader with the question of whether their religion is real or merely evaporating.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether your repentance has *hesed* at its center or only its verbal form.

[Mind/belief] Israel could produce the words of return — “come, let us return to the LORD” — without the covenant loyalty that makes return real. The diagnostic question this passage presses on the reader is not “do I know the language of repentance?” but “is there durable *hesed* beneath the language?” A person may be thoroughly fluent in evangelical repentance vocabulary — confession, surrender, returning — while the loyalty underneath evaporates by mid-morning, like dew that never made it past the heat of the first inconvenient circumstance. Hosea 6 demands that the reader stop measuring the reality of their repentance by the quality of their language and start measuring it by the durability of their covenant loyalty when it costs something.

2. Grieve the specific ways you have offered God the form of religion while withholding the substance. [Affections/worship] God’s response to Israel’s repentance speech is not anger alone — it is a lament: “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah?” God is not indifferent to the gap between Israel’s words and their loyalty; He grieves it. The appropriate response to this passage is not merely cognitive adjustment but grief — grief that mirrors God’s own. The reader should be moved to name specifically where they have brought the form: the attendance, the vocabulary, the outward

observance — while the *hesed*, the loyal love, the genuine knowing of God, was absent. That grief, if it is real, is the beginning of the very thing God is asking for.

3. Recognize that only new covenant grace can produce the *hesed* God requires — stop trying to generate it from religious effort. [Mind/belief] The failure Hosea diagnoses is not a failure of effort — Israel was offering sacrifices, making burnt offerings, performing the religious calendar. The failure is a failure of heart, and no amount of additional religious effort repairs a heart problem. The new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31 and its fulfillment in Christ is the specific answer to the specific problem Hosea maps: God will write His law on the heart, not merely demand it from the outside. The implication for the reader is not “try harder to produce *hesed*” but “the *hesed* God requires has been secured in Christ and is given by the Spirit — receive it, depend on it, don’t manufacture a substitute.” Religious performance as the engine of covenant loyalty is exactly the error Hosea corrects.

4. Let the knowledge of God — relational, not merely informational — be the governing hunger of your devotional life. [Affections/worship] God desires “the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.” *Da’at ’elohim* in Hosea is covenantal intimacy — the knowing of a covenant partner, not the accumulation of theological data. A person can accumulate accurate theological content about God while remaining a stranger to this knowing. The application is a reorientation of what you are actually seeking when you open Scripture, when you pray, when you gather with the church: not information about God, not the emotional experience of worship, but the knowing of God that is covenantal, personal, and transforming. This kind of knowing produces *hesed* because you cannot be intimately acquainted with the God of *hesed* without becoming, by grace, a person characterized by it.

5. Where you have positions of spiritual leadership or teaching, examine whether you are guarding the covenant or committing atrocity on the road to it. [Will/behavior] The most striking indictment in the chapter’s closing section is the priests who murder on the road to Shechem — the road to the city of refuge. Those appointed to guard the covenant and lead people toward grace are instead becoming obstacles and sources of harm. This is not a generic call to leadership integrity; it is a specific warning about the inversion that happens when religious leaders use their position to cover their own covenant-breaking. Pastors, elders, Bible study leaders, parents: where have you used your spiritual authority to protect yourself rather than protect those in your care? Where have you communicated the form of the faith while privately violating its substance? The priests in verses 8–9 are the structural parallel to the whole people in verses 1–3 — the leaders gave the people what they themselves were: liturgically fluent and covenantally hollow.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Hosea 6 delivers one of the most penetrating divine diagnoses of the human religious condition in all of Scripture. God here asserts that He is not interested in sacrificial performance that substitutes for covenant loyalty; what He requires is *hesed*

— the durable, steadfast, covenantally grounded love that expresses itself in genuine knowledge of and relationship with God. This reveals something essential about the character of God: He is not primarily a God who demands cultic compliance but a God who seeks covenant intimacy. His question to Ephraim and Judah — “What shall I do with you?” — is not the frustrated question of a tyrant but the grieved question of a covenant partner who has been given the form and denied the reality. The passage also reveals the nature of God’s word through the prophets: it comes as a wounding instrument, cutting precisely because it exposes what is hollow, but cutting for the purpose of healing, not destruction. God does not expose Israel’s hollow religion because He has given up on covenant relationship; He exposes it because genuine relationship is what He is still, in the midst of judgment, pursuing.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Hosea 6 is a foundational text for the Reformed understanding of the relationship between external religion and saving grace. The *hesed*-deficit Israel displays is precisely the condition that the doctrines of grace address: no amount of religious effort, sacrificial performance, or liturgical competence can produce the covenant loyalty God requires, because the problem is not informational or behavioral but located in the orientation of the heart. This passage grounds the Reformed insistence that justification and true religion are not produced by human religious performance but are the fruit of transforming grace. Verse 6 also carries profound implications for the Reformed understanding of the law’s function: “I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice” is not an abrogation of the ceremonial law but an exposure of the heart condition that renders law-keeping hollow — precisely the function of the law in Reformed soteriology (Gal. 3:24). The new covenant fulfillment — the writing of the law on the heart that Jeremiah 31 promises and the Spirit of Christ accomplishes — is the specific remedy for the specific disease Hosea diagnoses. Christ’s own citation of verse 6 in Matthew 9 and 12 applies this diagnosis to those who are scrupulous religious performers while missing the *hesed* that genuine knowledge of God produces.

Main Takeaway

God is not impressed by your religious vocabulary or your sacrificial calendar. What He is looking for is a covenant loyalty — a *hesed* — that doesn’t evaporate when the morning gets warm, that is as durable as His own faithfulness rather than as transient as dew. Israel could talk like God’s people while living like His enemies, and God saw the gap. The question this chapter presses on every reader is simple and devastating: Is your loyalty to God real, or is it the kind that sounds right in the morning and is gone by noon? The only answer that is not hollow is the one that comes from genuine knowledge of God — not religious performance, but the kind of knowing that only new covenant grace produces.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating verses 1–3 as genuine repentance that God accepts.** The most common misreading of this chapter is to hear the opening speech as sincere, admirable repentance that simply needs a little more depth or follow-through. This reading collapses before God’s own response: His lament in verse 4 and His diagnosis in verses 4–6 evaluate the speech of verses 1–3 as the evidence of the very problem He is indicting. Preach the speech in verses 1–3 as the problem, not the solution. The people’s religious fluency is not the beginning of something good that needs completion; it is the hollow substitute that God is exposing.
- **Reading verse 6 as an abolition of external worship in favor of inward sincerity.** “I desire *hesed* and not sacrifice” is not a Reformational slogan against ritual or liturgy. God is not saying external worship is bad or unnecessary; He is saying that external worship offered by a heart with no *hesed* and no genuine knowledge of God is a broken and offensive thing. The preacher who uses this verse to commend “authentic spirituality” over against “dead ritualism” may be making a true secondary point but has missed the specific diagnostic claim: the problem is the covenant-loyalty deficit that makes the ritual hollow, not ritual as such.
- **Moralizing the application: “Just try harder to love God more.”** The *hesed* God requires cannot be worked up from within by moral effort. Preaching this passage without routing the application through new covenant grace — through the Spirit’s work, through what Christ has secured — will produce either despair (I cannot generate this) or Pharisaism (I will generate a better version of this through discipline). The applications must name the *hesed* God requires and then immediately point to the grace that produces it, not merely demand it.
- **Ignoring the priestly indictment in verses 8–9.** Preachers who are themselves in positions of spiritual authority will find it convenient to skip quickly past the priests who murder on the road to Shechem. This is precisely the section that addresses them. The same gap between religious fluency and covenant reality that characterizes the people in verses 1–3 characterizes the leaders in verses 8–9 — but the leaders’ failure is more lethal because it harms those under their care. Any exposition of Hosea 6 that does not press the specific indictment of spiritual leadership is incomplete.
- **Domesticating “the knowledge of God” into Bible study habits.** When verse 6 speaks of “the knowledge of God,” preachers are tempted to apply this as “read your Bible more” or “grow in theological understanding.” *Da’at ’elohim* in Hosea is covenantal intimacy, not information acquisition. The application is not about the quantity or quality of theological content consumed but about the relational, covenantal knowing that produces *hesed* — the kind of knowing that transforms the

person who is known and knows. Reducing this to a devotional habit misses the depth of what the passage demands.

- **Missing the note of hope in verse 11b.** The chapter ends with judgment (“a harvest is appointed for you, O Judah”) but contains within it the seed: “when I restore the fortunes of my people.” The preacher who ends on unrelieved indictment has not preached all of verse 11. The God who laments in verse 4, who diagnoses in verse 6, and who catalogues violations in verses 7–11 is the same God who has restoration in view. This is not a soft landing that undermines the indictment; it is the covenant framework that makes the indictment intelligible — God exposes the hollow because He intends to fill it.