

# Lesson 17

**Hosea 4:4** (KJV) – Yet let no man strive, nor reprove another: for thy people are as they that strive with the priest.

In verse 4, the people are told not to strive against each other or reprove each other. Why? Because “thy people are as they that strive with the priest.”

And what does that answer mean? That’s both a very good question and a very difficult question! Let’s proceed carefully.

First, who is being addressed? When verse 4 refers to “thy people,” whose people is it?

I think the answer to that question appears when we look ahead a verse. In the next verse, we will see a reference to “thy mother.” And here in verse 4, we see “thy people.”

I think that Hosea is once again using the metaphor of a woman and her children to describe the society of Israel and the people living in that society. That is what we saw in chapter 2, and I think that is what we are seeing here in chapter 4.

Second, why are the people told not to strive with each or reprove each other? They have just been tried in a court of a law, found guilty, and sentenced. A natural response would be for them to start blaming each other for what had happened

to them. But verse 4 says no. Don't blame each other.

Why? The most likely explanation for why the people were not to blame each other is that someone else was to blame. Yes, they had their own individual responsibility, but perhaps there was someone else who had an even greater responsibility.

Who? The end of verse 4 gives us a very big hint – the priests. And as we read further, we will see that that answer is correct. The religious leaders were ultimately the ones to blame for the apostasy of the people.

So, our third question then is what the phrase in the second half of verse 4 means. "Thy people are as they that strive with the priest." How is that phrase an explanation for why the people are not to blame each other?

I think the answer appears when we remember what we saw at the beginning of chapter 4 – a court case. And in verse 2 we saw the evidence for the charges in verse 1. I think here in verse 4 we are again seeing the evidence – not the evidence for the charges against the people, but the evidence for the charges against the priests.

And what was that evidence? What was the best evidence that the priests were not doing the right things and were not teaching the right things? The best evidence was the people they were supposed to be teaching!

Verse 2 tells us that the people were faithless, loveless, and ignorant. There could be no better evidence than that against the religious leaders who were charged with seeing that the people were the opposite of what we see in verse 2. Had the priests in verse 4 been doing their job, the people would not have reached the sad state we see back in verse 2.

“Thy people are as they that strive with the priest.” I think what that phrase means is that the people are like those that bring evidence against the priest. The way you would strive with a priest would be to bring evidence against the priest.

And how are the people like those that bring evidence against a priest? Because they themselves are that evidence!

When the people lack faithfulness, they are in effect striving with their religious leaders. How? Because their lack of faith is itself evidence against those religious leaders. And likewise with their lack of love and their lack of knowledge.

The people may not have known they were bringing evidence against the priests, but they were – just as surely as if they had shown up in a court with evidence against a priest. They were like those who strive with a priest!

So, perhaps we can paraphrase verse 4 this way:

“Even though you are all faithless, loveless, and ignorant about God, there is no point in

accusing each other or blaming each other. Why? Because when you live the way you do, you are really bringing charges against your religious leaders. You yourselves are evidence for what a poor job the priests have done.”

And, as always, there is a big lesson here for us. When we see once faithful congregations that have drifted off into the ways of the world, who is to blame? Yes, we each have an individual responsibility, but when a ship goes astray, shouldn't we look first at the one whose hand was steering that ship? I think that is what verse 4 is doing with Israel.

How well are our own religious leaders doing at their job? The best evidence with which to answer that question is us.

- Are we closer to God this week than last week?
- Do we know more about God's word this week than last week?
- Are we doing the work of the kingdom?
- Are we functioning as a healthy body?
- Are we becoming more and more like Jesus as we daily walk with him?
- Are we faithfully following the pattern left for us in the New Testament?
- Are we showing our love for God, for each other, and for the lost?

When we answer those questions about how well we are doing, we will have also answered our first question – how well are our religious leaders doing?

I think that is the same point that Paul was making with the Corinthians.

**2 Corinthians 3:2-3 – You yourselves are our letter of recommendation**, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

Listen to Paul – “You yourselves are our letter!”  
You are our evidence!

## **Hosea 4:5**

5 You shall stumble by day; the prophet also shall stumble with you by night; and I will destroy your mother.

Who is the “you” in verse 5? I think the best answer is to look at the previous word at the end of verse 4 – “priest.” And we can also look at the next verse: “because **you** have rejected knowledge, I reject **you** from being a **priest** to me.”

Verse 5 is directed to the priests who were just identified as the ones who were really to blame for the sad state of the people.

Along with the priest, the prophet is also mentioned in verse 5. Together, the priest and the prophet represented the entire religious leadership.

The priest stumbles by day, and both the priest and the prophet stumble by night. What does that mean?

I think it means that the priests were worse than the prophets. One might be expected to stumble by night when there was no light, but the priests also stumbled during the day when there was plenty of light.

And while stumbling itself is not the sin, it may be the consequence of sin. What is the sin that could have caused the religious leadership to stumble? Verse 5 does not answer that question, but we find some hints in the immediate context.

If we look ahead a few verses, we find verse 11: "whoredom, wine, and new wine, which take away the understanding."

Drunkenness can cause stumbling, and so the sin of drunkenness may be the cause of the stumbling in verse 5. If so, we again see that the priests were worse than the prophets because the priests were apparently drinking day and night.

But I think verse 5 is not limited to drunkenness, at least not limited to *literal* drunkenness. And the stumbling in verse 5 may not be due to sin, but may be due to the punishment of sin. That is what we see in Jeremiah.

**Jeremiah 25:15-16** – Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them."

If that is also what we are seeing here, then again the priests are worse than the prophets because the priests are receiving a more severe punishment than the prophets.

What about the final phrase in verse 5? By now, we should be used to those strange phrases that seem to appear out of nowhere in Hosea, but even so they continue to shock us and grab our attention – and this phrase certainly does both of those things: “I will destroy your mother!” Who is that?

I think what we are seeing in that final phrase is confirmation of something we said earlier – that the mother in Hosea represents the evil society in which the ordinary people (the children of that mother) were raised. That evil society consisted of the political institutions and the religious leadership, and here the focus is on the religious leadership.

The end of verse 5 is simply restating something that God has already told us in this book – that God was about to bring Israel to an end. They would no longer be a nation. They would no longer be a people. They very soon would have no political institutions and no religious leadership.

This is the same thing we saw back in Hosea 3:4 – “For the children of Israel shall dwell many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or household gods.”

That is what verse 5 means when God says, "I will destroy your mother!"

## Hosea 4:6

6 My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me. And since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.

Verse 5 told us that the religious leadership would be destroyed, and verse 6 tells us that the people would also be destroyed. We are immediately reminded of something that Jesus said.

**Matthew 15:14** – Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, **both** will fall into a pit.

Hosea 4:6 may be the best known verse in the book of Hosea, although Hosea 8:7 is also a contender for that award.

One of the greatest Bible scholars I have ever known was a lady named Marion Williams who passed away in 1999. She studied her Bible for hours every day, filling it with her notes and comments – and I now have that Bible. In the margin next to Hosea 4:6, I think she summarized the verse very well – "What you don't know can destroy you!"

Knowledge is necessary, and don't let anyone ever convince you otherwise. Yes, the application of knowledge is also necessary, but absent knowledge



we have nothing to apply. We can't apply what we don't know.

And I for one get a bit nervous when I'm told that some knowledge about God is important, but other knowledge about God is not important. I am certainly in no position to make that distinction, and I don't think anyone else is either.

When it comes to knowledge about God, I don't ever want to be like the people who are described by a quote that I found written in my grandfather's Bible: "they are like a duck paddling across the surface of a large lake, taking in only an inch of water, completely unaware of the fathomless depths that lie beneath."

Does that mean that I must have an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible to be saved or to be pleasing to God? No, but it does mean that I need to be very careful about what I do not know about the Bible. It means that I must never put my Bible down and say that I now know enough about God. This same verse that talks about **lacking** knowledge also talks about **rejecting** knowledge! And there is no ignorance so deep as the ignorance that will not know!

We already know that knowledge of God is a central theme in Hosea, and here we see why – absent that knowledge, the people will be destroyed.

And we also already know that this knowledge of God is a broad term that includes both objective

knowledge and subjective knowledge. It is a broad term that includes, not only an academic knowledge about God, but also intimate and experiential knowledge about God. It is the same word that is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the knowledge between husband and wife.

And so, while it is correct to read Hosea 4:6 and conclude that we must have an academic knowledge of God's word, it is **not** correct to read Hosea 4:6 and conclude that we must have **only** an academic knowledge of God's word. Much, much more is required to have the knowledge of God that the people in Hosea 4:6 were lacking.

I need more than an academic knowledge of God to be pleasing to God. If the only knowledge of God that I have is an academic knowledge, then I will still be destroyed for lack of knowledge.

Let's consider an extreme example. One of my favorite authors is Isaac Asimov. I don't read much of his work these days, but if you had met me in high school, you would have seen me carrying a book by Isaac Asimov. He wrote hundreds of books about science fact and science fiction, and I read them as fast as I could find them. I became an electrical engineer because of Isaac Asimov.

But Asimov didn't just write books about science – I also have his guide to Shakespeare, his guide to *Paradise Lost*, his guide to world chronology, and his guide to the Bible. In that latter book, Asimov marched book by book through the Bible, dissecting and discussing everything that he found. Asimov had an encyclopedic knowledge of

the Bible for the simple reason that he wrote an encyclopedia about the Bible!

And what impact did all of that Bible knowledge have on Isaac Asimov's life? He was an atheist up to the day of his death. (But, of course, we know that he was **not** an atheist **after** the day of his death!)

We need much more than just an academic knowledge about God to be pleasing to God and to keep from being destroyed for lack of knowledge. We need to **know** God.

We need to have a relationship with God. We need to have knowledge of God like that between a husband and wife. And that knowledge includes objective knowledge, subjective knowledge, academic knowledge, intimate knowledge, and experiential knowledge. We need all of that – and if any is lacking, we, like the people in Hosea 4:6, could be destroyed.

There are so many lessons for us today in Hosea 4:6 that it is hard to know where to begin in discussing them. The handout for Lesson 17 has two articles from the *Gospel Advocate* and the *Christian Chronicle* that discuss some modern-day lessons for the church.

For yet another lesson, we could listen to a very famous figure in the recent history of the church – N. B. Hardeman.

N. B. Hardeman was born in 1874 and died in 1965 at the age of 91. He was by any measure one of the best and most well-known preachers in the

church, at least in modern history. He celebrated his 85th birthday with a party at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis that was attended by the then future president, Lyndon Johnson.

Between 1922 and 1942, N. B. Hardeman preached a series of sermons at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville on five separate occasions that were called the Tabernacle Sermons. Those sermons drew crowds of up to 8,000 people, with 2,000 or more turned away each night. Thousands more read the sermons daily in the local newspaper, and, starting with the third series, many more heard the sermons over the radio.

Guy N. Woods said:

“The Hardeman Tabernacle Sermons, all things considered, is the finest series of sermons ever published in the English language. As long as the world stands, they will never be surpassed for their amazing simplicity of style, striking clarity of diction, and widest possible inclusion of basic and fundamental truth.”

Brother Hardeman also engaged in frequent debates on a variety of subjects, and many of those debates are available in book form, as are all of the Tabernacle Sermons.

What were those sermons like? Here is a quote from one of them:

“There’s but one thing that I know about wherein there is an absolute certainty, and that is the work of the Lord. Stand fast in that, because we know that when we labor in His name, and according to His word, it will not be in vain; but on fairer fields and in brighter climes, in the glad sweet by and by, in a land across which

the shadows have never come, a home of an unclouded day, we shall reap the handsome reward. I am saying, therefore, friends, to all of you that love the truth: buckle on God's armor afresh tonight, raise aloft the sword dipped in the blood of the spotless Son of God, unsheathe the sword of the Spirit, march faithfully on under the leadership of Him who has never yet lost a single conflict; and by and by, when life's dream is over, when its race is won, its battles fought, and its victories won, He'll bid us lay aside our old battle-scarred armor on the glad plains of eternity, hang our swords upon the jasper walls of that eternal city, while with palms of victory and with crowns of glory, we sweep through the gates into the beauties and grandeurs that passeth understanding. In the sweet by and by, what will it mean to be there?"

I have a special relation with Brother Hardeman – I would not be standing here today but for N. B. Hardeman. In fact, I would not be standing anywhere today but for N. B. Hardeman. It was Brother Hardeman who recommended my grandfather for a preaching position in Paducah, Kentucky, where my future parents first met each other when they were only 14.

But, you ask, what is the relation between N.B. Hardeman and Hosea 4:6?

In 1960, when Brother Hardeman was 86 years old, he was asked in an interview to list the greatest dangers facing the church today. He listed four dangers, and the very first danger facing the church, he said, was "a lack of Bible knowledge and a light regard for what it says."

The second danger facing the church, he said, was "a tendency to make the church a social club for entertainment." The third danger facing the

church, he said, was “a disposition to compromise the truth and discourage its preaching.” The fourth danger facing the church, he said, was “a love for the praise of men more than the praise of God.”

Each of those dangers deserves its own lesson, but that first danger is the one upon which we are focused today – and it was the first danger he listed: “a lack of Bible knowledge and a light regard for what it says.” And that danger for the church is the same danger we see in Hosea 4:6 – “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.”

There is yet another important lesson for us here in Hosea 4:6 – the great responsibility of teachers.

Why did the people in Hosea 4:6 lack knowledge? Because the priests had rejected knowledge. The people lacked knowledge because the priests had failed to teach them.

And, unlike today, the people in Hosea 4:6 did not have their shelves filled with Bibles – they relied entirely on priests and prophets to teach them the word of God. Those priests and those prophets had a great responsibility to accurately teach the entire word of God – and they had failed in that responsibility.

And is that still true today? Do teachers today still have that same great responsibility?

**James 3:1** – Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

I know there is a popular notion that we should all be teachers, but that popular notion is the opposite of what we just read from the Bible: "Not many of you should become teachers."

Yes, we should all be ready to give an answer and make a defense (Colossians 4:6, 1 Peter 3:15), but James 3:1 is very hard to misunderstand: "Not many of you should become teachers."

And the reason for that command is also very hard to misunderstand: "for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness."

If I **believe** something false about God, that is one thing, but if I then stand up, purporting to teach the word of God, and then **teach** others that false thing about God, that is quite another thing!

Why do I spend hours and hours each week working on these lessons? One reason is that I don't want to get up here and just repeat things we all already know. But a more important reason is that I know that I will be judged more strictly. I know that I have a great responsibility to be accurate in what I teach, and I know that God will hold me to that responsibility.

And if we ever put someone in the role of a teacher who is not prepared for that role, then we are doing that person no favor! Instead, we are placing that person in a very dangerous position! I do not see any other way of understanding the command in James 3:1.

And how dangerous? Look again at Hosea 4:6 – the priests who failed to teach Israel the required knowledge about God were rejected. That is very dangerous!

Moving on, the final statement in verse 6 is that “since you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” What does that mean?

First, not only had the priests rejected knowledge, but they had forgotten the law. They were not teaching the law because they did not know the law. It is very hard to teach something that you don’t know.

But second, God says that, as a result of the priests forgetting the law, God would forget their children. Who were their children?

Some commentaries suggests that these are the literal physical children of these priests. Being a priest in Israel was a family business! If God disowned someone from being a priest, the sons of that priest would also be disowned. That family would lose their status as a family of priests.

That is certainly possible, but I think the context is pushing us in a different direction.

In the previous verse God promised to destroy your mother, and here in the next verse God promises to forget your children. I think the “children” here in verse 6 are the children of that mother – that is, these children are the ordinary people of Israel who had been raised in the evil culture represented by that mother. I



think the children at the end of verse 6 are the people at the beginning of verse 6.

God forgetting these children reminds us of Hosea's own children – Not Mine and Not Loved!

Both the priests and the people would be destroyed. "And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit."

## Hosea 4:7–8

7 The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame. 8 They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity.

The first thing we may notice about verses 7–8 is a grammatical difference with verse 6.

Verse 6 says: "because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me." But now in verses 7–8, we read: "The more they increased, the more they sinned against me; I will change their glory into shame. They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity."

Why the switch from singular to plural? Who is being addressed here?

Some commentaries think that the conflict in verse 6 was a conflict with a specific priest, but I don't see any evidence of that in the context. I think the focus here is on the priesthood as a whole. Israel had not been led

astray by a single priest but rather by the entire priesthood.

But why then do we see this mix of singular and plural?

I think the best answer is that the **singular** denunciation in verse 6 targets the priesthood as a whole, while the **plural** denunciation in verses 7-8 targets the individual priests that made up that priesthood. If so, the distinction is very subtle, and I don't think we should read too much into it. It is just a way of looking at the same problem from two different angles.

The first charge in verse 7 is that "the more they increased, the more they sinned against me." What does that mean?

Here it is helpful to recall the historical overview that we looked at in our introductory lessons. As you recall, when Hosea first began to preach, the people were living in a time of great peace and prosperity under King Jeroboam II, but that was all just about to change with the death of that king and the civil war that followed.

But, during that period of peace and prosperity, more people were able to enter the priesthood and more people wanted to enter the priesthood. And the increased headcount of priests was, no doubt, considered by the people as a sign of great religious and spiritual vitality. But that view was completely wrong.

Instead, as the number of priests increased, so did the sins of those priests. And that has often

been the case throughout history when numerical growth becomes the only goal. "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell."

And what did God say that he would do in response to that increase of sin? "I will change their glory into shame." What does that mean?

The NIV capitalizes the word "glory," apparently suggesting that these priests were exchanging God himself for something shameful.

But I think a much better view is that the glory in verse 7 is the glory of the priests themselves. As we said, more men wanted to become priests during periods of peace and prosperity, and the reason for that was that the priests enjoyed great status and privilege during periods of prosperity.

The priests received glory from the people who believed that their own prosperity was due, at least in part, to the priests themselves. That view of "glory" fits nicely with the view of "increase" that we just looked at.

But these priests would soon discover that glory from men is fleeting. They should have been seeking glory from God, but instead they were increasing in their rebellion against God. And so God would give them shame in place of their earthly glory. As one commentary explained:

The judgment is that someday God will bring the priests into disgrace in that he will cause the

people to recognize them for the frauds they are and to despise them.

And, of course, that day was coming very soon. Rather than thanking these priests for their prosperity, the people would soon be blaming these priests for their calamity.

We see a second charge in verse 8: "They feed on the sin of my people; they are greedy for their iniquity." What does that mean?

The word translated "sin" in verse 8 can also mean "sin offering." That has caused some commentaries to conclude that these priests were feeding on the sacrifices that the people brought.

But other commentaries have noted some potential problems with that view.

First, the priests had a right to eat those offerings.

**Leviticus 6:26** – The priest who offers it for sin shall eat it. In a holy place it shall be eaten, in the court of the tent of meeting.

And second, the word translated "iniquity" in the second half of verse 8 never refers to a sacrifice.

I think the answer is to take a step back and look at verse 8 from a broader perspective. I think there is an underlying theme of Hosea at play here in verse 8 – and that theme is the theme of sacrifice.

The word “sacrifice” appears nine times in Hosea, and three of those nine occurrences are found right here in chapter 4.

**Hosea 4:13** – They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains and burn offerings on the hills, under oak, poplar, and terebinth, because their shade is good. Therefore your daughters play the whore, and your brides commit adultery.

**Hosea 4:14** – I will not punish your daughters when they play the whore, nor your brides when they commit adultery; for the men themselves go aside with prostitutes and sacrifice with cult prostitutes, and a people without understanding shall come to ruin.

**Hosea 4:19** – A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices.

And we will see a later verse about sacrifice in Hosea that was quoted by Jesus in Matthew.

**Hosea 6:6** – For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

**Matthew 9:13** – Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.

**Matthew 12:7** – And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.

I think verse 8 is focused on the sacrificial system.

As we said, the first half of verse 8 is likely referring to the sin offerings that were sacrificed.

Yes, the priests had a right to eat those offerings, but that right would not extend to greed and gluttony. That right would not excuse a priest whose sole motivation had become what he could get from the people.

And what about the word “iniquities” in the second half of verse 8? “They are greedy for their iniquity.”

Although not used elsewhere for that purpose, I think the word “iniquity” is being used here to describe a sacrificial system that had become corrupted and that had lost its original intent.

Instead of being a means for confession and grace, the sacrificial system had become a means for permissiveness and gluttony. A modern analogy would be the Catholic practice of selling indulgences. The priests in Hosea’s day likewise used the sacrificial system as a way to profit from the people and to manipulate the people through cheap grace and superstition.

I think we will see more evidence for this view as we proceed through the remainder of this chapter and the remainder of this book.