

No Compassion
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Jonah 4:1-11

Today we finish our study of Jonah. Before we talk about Jonah, let's zoom to Luke 15 and Jesus' parable of the Prodigal son. It's a familiar story. The younger of two sons says to the loving father: *"Give me my inheritance, I'm headed to Vegas!"* The son blows his loot on wine and women and winds up in the gutter. Contrite and broken he comes home hoping to at least be a hired hand.

His compassionate father receives him with joy and celebration, but then there was the older brother. *"You're throwing a party for that carousing, sinful sot! You never threw a party for me!"* The loving father said to the older brother: *'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. ³² We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'* Question: If we were to see ourselves as one of the brothers, which brother would we want to be? Which brother was Jonah like when God called him to preach to the sinful Ninevites? Why was Jonah like the older brother?

The younger son came to his senses and repented. The compassionate father restored him with celebration. The older brother was just angry. *"How was this fair?"* The older brother saw his foolish, reckless kid brother through eyes of contempt. The loving father saw him with eyes of compassion. The loving embrace and lavish feast were things the sinful son didn't deserve. They were the undeserved love and favor of a compassionate father. We call that "grace."

The point: We humans often confuse behavior and lostness. When we look at the behavior of the most sinful pagans we believe it deserves punishment. When God looks at the most sinful pagans He sees lostness. He sees them with the eyes of grace. He sacrificed His only Son to pay for their grace party. If we think that's unfair, then we might be either an "older brother" or a prophet named Jonah.

I'm getting ahead of the story. When last we left the rebellious Prophet Jonah he was laying on the beach covered in seaweed and big fish vomit.

Jonah 3:1–5 (NLT) — **1** Then the Lord spoke to Jonah a second time: **2** "Get up and go to the great city of Nineveh, and deliver the message I have given you." **3** This time Jonah obeyed the Lord's command and went to Nineveh, a city so large that it took three days to see it all. **4** On the day Jonah entered the city, he shouted to the crowds: "Forty days from now Nineveh will be destroyed!" **5** The people of Nineveh believed God's message, and from the greatest to the least, they declared a fast and put on burlap to show their sorrow.

Jonah 3:10 (NLT) — 10 When God saw what they had done and how they had put a stop to their evil ways, he changed his mind and did not carry out the destruction he had threatened.

- If we closed our Bibles at the end of verse ten it's a celebration; but the story doesn't end at verse ten. Let's read today's text and talk about Jonah's bad attitude in response to God's compassion.

Jonah 4:1–11 (NLT) — 1 This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. **2** So he complained to the Lord about it: "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. **3** Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen." **4** The Lord replied, "Is it right for you to be angry about this?" **5** Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. **6** And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah's head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant. **7** But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. **8** And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah. The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. "Death is certainly better than living like this!" he exclaimed. **9** Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?" "Yes," Jonah retorted, "even angry enough to die!" **10** Then the Lord said, "You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. **11** But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"

- The book of Jonah ends with God's question and no reply from Jonah.
- God's question is much like the last verse in the Prodigal Son parable.
- The father said to the older son: "*We had to celebrate because your brother was lost, but now he is found!*"
- God said to Jonah, "*These Ninevite people were living in darkness, shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?*"
- Think about the job description of a prophet of God. What was their "job" – their basic assignment from God? What was the definition of success?
- Based on that metric of success, Jonah was arguably the most successful prophet of God. He preached a one sentence sermon and the whole, sinful city "from the greatest to the least" turned from their "evil ways."
- What was Jonah's reaction to the great evangelistic triumph?
- Chapter four verse two gives Jonah's candid confession of why he was so mad: ² So he complained to the Lord... "Didn't I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that

you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people.ⁱⁱ

- Then in verse three: ³ Just kill me now, Lord! I'd rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen."ⁱⁱⁱ
- The people responded positively to God's warning so why was Jonah angry? How does that verse indicate Jonah's ego was bruised? There are several theories on why Jonah didn't want God to "let Nineveh off the hook":
 - Maybe it was his Hebrew heritage. These were Gentiles!
 - Maybe it was his fear that Nineveh posed a threat to Israel.
 - Or based on verse three, Jonah's vanity. He wanted to be right!
- In verse four we see an important question for Jonah and for us. God said, *"Is it right for you to be angry about this?"*^{iv}
- What was the older brother so angry about? What was Jonah angry about? How were they similar in what they were angry about?
- In both cases Jonah and the older brother didn't think it was fair!
- We would never be that way, right? We're all about the Great Commission and sharing the gospel "from Woodstock to the world!"
- Those of us who grew up in church pine for the "good ole days" when carrying out the Great Commission seemed so neat and tidy.
- Reaching people for Christ has always been messy but in 2022 it's never been messier. In the leadership meeting last Sunday afternoon Pastor Jeremy challenged our leaders on this very point.
- We're all about reaching people and seeing God transform them.
- If we are honest it may be that we not only want them to go to Heaven, we also expect that when they are saved they will start looking like us!!
- Our "older brother/Jonah" syndrome starts innocently enough.
- We may be tempted to say, *"Boy, church sure has changed. I liked it better when we only sang hymns and when people got saved they really cleaned up their act --- and started looking like the rest of us!"*
- God asks: *"Is it right...to be angry about this?"*
- *"Okay, Lord, I can live with Christ-followers who look different than me."*
- Let's take it up a notch. How will a staunch conservative like me (and I AM) react when God puts a vocal liberal in my group who has professed faith in Christ. Will I love them like a brother or sister or will I say to God: *"When you saved them couldn't you have made them a Republican?"*
- God asks, *"Is it right to be angry about this?"*
- *"Okay, Lord, I will grit my teeth and love a Democrat but it will be hard!"*
- Let's make reaching people for Christ a little messier than that.
- What will I do when a same sex couple (legally married) shows up at church seeking to understand the good news we Christ-followers talk about? How will I balance showing love and compassion with not compromising biblical truth about marriage in God's eyes?
- Will I say, *"Lord, can't people like that go to some other church?"*
- Will God ask, *"Is it right to be angry about this?"*

- This is getting complicated! I'm not prepared to ask God to just kill me but I might want to go hide under a big plant and sulk like Jonah did.
- To be clear, I don't pretend to have all the answers to those questions, but I'm raising them because as Christ-followers we must think about them.
- Here is what I know for certain: God's grace is not "fair."
- The older brother and Jonah didn't think either father was being fair.
- If God's grace was fair then Nineveh would have been a smoking crater and so would I.
- Grace isn't fair, but it is amazing and I need to look at pagans as God sees them, with compassion instead of contempt --- through the eyes of grace. No one said it would be neat and tidy.
- Other thoughts?

So, What's the Takeaway?

- We Christ-followers often confuse behavior and lostness. When we look at the behavior of the most sinful pagans we believe it deserves punishment.
- When God looks at the most sinful pagans He sees them with the eyes of grace. Their sin DOES deserve punishment and so DOES ours. God sacrificed His only Son to pay for their "grace party."
- If we think that's unfair, then we might be either an "older brother" or a prophet named Jonah.
- God might be asking, *"Is it right for you to be so angry about this?"*
- What did Jesus teach us? The Pharisees "said to his disciples, *"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?"*¹² *But when he heard it, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick."*^v
- I guess Jesus was saying to the Pharisees: *"Is it right for you to be so angry about this?"*
- I usually try to tie up a lesson with a firm, definite challenge for us all.
- The truth of this passage IS firm and definite: God loves sinners and wants them to be saved. The complicated part is carrying out the Great Commission in the context of this messy time in which we live.
- The questions I've raised don't have easy answers.
- They kind of leave us like the last verse in Jonah. God asked a question but Jonah didn't have an answer.
- We don't have all the answers to doing church in 2022 but we do need to toil with God's last question: When people are living in "spiritual darkness" (even the animals in Nineveh's case) *"shouldn't I feel sorry for such a great city?"* Will we see pagans as God see them with eyes of grace, or will we just be angry?

ⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](#) (Lk 15:31–32). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](#) (Jon 4:2). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](#) (Jon 4:3). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

^{iv} Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). [*Holy Bible: New Living Translation*](#) (Jon 4:4). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

^v [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#). (2016). (Mt 9:11–12). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.