

Sermon Series: Unrelenting Love

God's Relentless Pursuit of Rebels | The Story of Jonah

Sermon Title: God's Compassion Brings Repentance

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Several years ago, many Christians were understandably offended when TV mogul Ted Turner in an interview called Christianity a "*Religion for Losers*". They called for believers to boycott all of Turner's media outlets such as CNN and Turner broadcasting. I understand their reasoning; they perceived Turner, a known agnostic, was attacking the faith. But in actuality it was one of those rare times that Christians actually should have agreed with Ted Turner. I believe that Christianity is a religion for losers. The problem, of course, is that Turner didn't think of himself as a loser and therefore didn't know his need of God. But Jesus actually taught his disciples that the only way to gain the kingdom was by becoming a loser ("*Blessed are the losers, for theirs is the kingdom of God*").

In this book that we have been studying, Jonah was a loser in every sense of the word. He was a rebel, a renegade, a runner, a man who blew it and ended up in a fish. You know how God deals with rebels, renegades, runners. He cuts them off and judges them, giving them their just reward. That's what he did with King Saul in the Old Testament. Judas in the New Testament betrayed the Lord and committed suicide. That's the way we might expect God to act towards his disobedient servant, Jonah. But as we read this book, we find that instead of dealing in judgment with his servant, God deals *mercifully* with him. In fact, this whole chapter is a living demonstration of a powerful statement from the lips of Paul in Romans: "*Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*" (Romans 2:4).

This chapter is not about Jonah's obedience or the people of Nineveh's repentance but the *incredible kindness and graciousness of God to sinners*. It is about mercy that is not owed but is freely extended to a wayward prophet and then to a rebellious, prideful and violent people. What both were owed was judgment but God extended his kindness to both. All of this is worked out in the context of God's missionary heart for people who don't know Him and have spurned him and aren't looking for him.

The Significance of the Word "Great" in the book of Jonah

There is a word that until now we have ignored that appears multiple times in this story. It is the word *great* (the Hebrew word is "*gadol*"). In chapter one, it is a *great* storm. In the end of chapter one leading to chapter two, it is a *great* fish that swallows Jonah. Here in chapter three it is a *great* city; literally, a "great city to God." It doesn't mean that the people of Nineveh were wonderful, lovely people but that the city itself was great (We might say the same thing about New York City. It is large, a business center and heavily populated. In that sense of the word; it is a great city. We are not speaking of the character of the people, but the impact and influence a large city has).

God doesn't send Jonah just to individuals but to an entire city. *So one thing we learn in this book is that God deems cities as important.* Do you know why cities are so important to God? **God's future redeemed universe and world is depicted in Scripture as a city.** *Abraham sought for a city whose builder and maker was God* (Heb. 11:10). *I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, adorned as a bride prepared for her husband* (Rev 21). In fact, in this we see something very clear. ***God's redemptive purpose begins in a garden and ends in a city.*** So that is why cities are important to God for God's perfected work in the earth is seen as a city. Viewed in that light, it is interesting that today we are seeing the increasing urbanization of the world population. A recent UN report shows that at least half the world's population will live in urban areas by the end of this year. But what is even more important is that it is estimated that by about 2050 about 70 percent will be city dwellers. So, it is not surprising that God sends Jonah to a great city. That also

accounts for why the great apostle to the Gentiles, centuries later, takes the good news to the entire Roman Empire by strategically planting churches in the great cities throughout the Roman world.

God Is Sovereign in his Providential Care

We have seen so far in Jonah that God is sovereign in his providential care of his servant, as well as what lengths he goes in order to save Nineveh. He controlled the storm he sent when Jonah disobeyed. He controlled the lots cast that proved to the sailors the storm had come because of Jonah. He directs the sailors' decision to throw Jonah overboard. He is seen directing the hearts of the sailors to fear the Lord so that even in Jonah's disobedience, they are saved. He controlled the fish he sent to swallow Jonah and preserves him from certain death. Now, at the closing of chapter two and the beginning of chapter three, He is seen controlling the fish again when he commands it to spit Jonah out on the shore. And now he is seen controlling the message that Jonah was to give to the city of Nineveh. Again, a second time, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah to "*Arise, go to Nineveh and call out against it the message I will tell you.*" And all of this providential activity is now seen in the compassion and mercy. He determines to show a rebellious people. Remember who Jonah is being sent to: a rebellious, bloodily, violent, God-hating people.

There is something that I have been deeply brooding on when seeking to understand this book, especially the last two chapters. The book of Jonah may best be understood in the light of the Parable of the Two Lost Sons (or Prodigal Son). Nineveh may be seen as the younger, rebellious brother who spurns God and lives in direct violation of his plan and purpose. In every way, he lives in direct violation of God's holy ordinances and shows no desire to change. It is to him that God is going to show his amazing mercy and compassion. But if Nineveh is the younger brother, then Jonah is the older, self-righteous brother who doesn't think God is being fair in dispensing his mercy on such a wretched people. And while he complains about how God dispenses his mercy, he has no idea how far he is from the heart of God.

So God's compassion is seen in two ways in the remaining two chapters of Jonah: first, *in his amazing compassion on his hard-hearted servant* and secondly, *showing his amazing mercy to people who least deserve it*. We will deal with the first one in our final message next week and deal with the second this morning (God's amazing mercy to people who least deserve it). **But this chapter not only demonstrates that it is God's compassion and kindness which saves us, it also teaches us some important truths regarding how God saves people.** First, this chapter teaches us that *God has ordained means* (specifically 'preaching') by which he saves people. Second, *it teaches us powerfully that grace and mercy are never owed and that the fact that God actually saves anyone is a miracle*. Thirdly, *what godly sorrow is that leads to repentance*.

First, ***God has ordained preaching as the means by which he saves people***. This entire book is about getting a man to cooperate with him so that he will go and preach to an ungodly city. Why does God go to such lengths to get Jonah to cooperate? Couldn't he have had mercy on Nineveh without sending Jonah to preach to them? The answer of course is, yes. God could have had mercy on them without Jonah preaching. *But God has ordained means by which he accomplishes his purpose to save men and women and that means is clearly revealed in Scripture as 'preaching'*. He didn't have to but he chose to allow human beings to cooperate with Him in the saving of a people. The clearest passage in Scripture that clarifies this is found in the book of Romans, the tenth chapter. Paul declares in verse 13 that "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" But then Paul asks a series of questions, logical questions that follow:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Rom. 10:14-17

God could have saved Nineveh without a preacher but his designated way is that “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” Someone has to preach. And even the message that Jonah was to preach was given to him. He wasn’t free to tell the Ninevites what he wanted but was told to: “*Call out the message I tell you.*” Preachers aren’t free to say some general things about God but are under strict commandment to preach specifically what they have been told. I know its popular today to demean preaching, to believe that it is an archaic practice, a relic from the past, a carryover from Constantine and that what we need today is more sharing—everyone coming together and sharing their hearts and talking about God. Sharing is fine and has its place. I love house churches where people share what they are learning from God. But none of this takes the place of preaching in accomplishing God’s purpose.

If someone here says preaching is weak and foolish, I couldn’t agree more. What could be more foolish than a man being swallowed by a fish who then walks through the streets of Nineveh proclaiming God’s judgment on the city and the entire city believes? Utterly foolish! Ultimate weakness. But listen to the apostle Paul:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written. “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

I Corinthians 1:17-25

Brothers and sisters, don’t despise preaching. Don’t become hardened to God’s means of keeping the Gospel central in your life. I fear for many of you here. You don’t know how to listen to the Word of God (you’ve heard it all before). You’ve heard all the preaching that you can stand. You have a little turnoff switch when a preacher arises because you are Gospel-hardened. Now there are two problems with preaching in the Church. First, there is much “*pulpiterring*” that passes for preaching. Second, there are many people who don’t know how to listen to the Word of God

Second, ***God’s amazing mercy shown to Jonah and to Nineveh is meant to shock us. That God saves anyone is miraculous.*** First of all, God is showing amazing mercy to Jonah. He could have found someone else to take his place but he gives Jonah a second chance. When he commissions him this second time there is no mention of his first failure. God is the God of second chances, the God of all grace. I think that God showing such exquisite mercy to both Jonah and Nineveh is meant to shock us; it’s not what we expect. We read how God forgave the sin of an entire pagan city and we are no longer shocked by God’s mercy because we have come to expect it. Over the years, I have had people ask repeatedly, “*Why doesn’t God save everyone?*” I have never once had a person ask the real question, the deeper question: “*In light of God’s holiness, why does God save anyone?*” That’s the real question. In his book *Holiness of God*, R.C. Sproul talks about how we have come to take grace for granted:

Our tendency to take (God’s) grace for granted was driven home to me while teaching a freshman Old Testament course to 250 students at a Christian college. On the first day of class I went over the course assignments carefully. My experience taught me that the assignment of term papers required a special degree of explanation. This course required three short papers. I explained to the students that the first paper was

due on my desk the noon of the last day of September. No extensions were to be given except for students who were physically confined to the infirmary or who had deaths in the immediate family. If the paper was not turned in on time, the student would receive an F for the assignment. The students acknowledged that they understood the requirements.

On the last day of September, 225 students dutifully handed in their term papers. Twenty-five students stood quaking in terror, full of remorse. They cried out, "Oh, Professor Sproul. We are sorry. We didn't budget our time properly. We didn't make the proper adjustment from high school to college. Please don't give us an F. Please, oh, please give us an extension."

I bowed to their pleas for mercy. "All right," I said. "I'll give you a break this time. But, remember, the next assignment is due the last day of October."

The students were profuse in their gratitude and filled the air with solemn promises of being on time for the next assignment. Then came the last day of October. Two hundred students came with their papers. Fifty students came empty-handed. They were nervous, but not in panic. When I asked for their papers, again they were contrite. "Oh, Professor. It was Homecoming Week. Besides it is midterm and all of our assignments are due in other classes. Please give us one more chance. We promise it will never happen again."

Once more I relented. I said, "OK, but this is the last time. If you are late for the next paper, it will be an F. No excuses, no whining. F. Is that clear?" "Oh, yes, Professor. You are terrific." Spontaneously the class began to sing, "We love you Prof Sproul. Oh, yes we do." I was Mr. Popularity.

Can you guess what happened on the last day of November? Right. One hundred and fifty students came with their term papers. The other hundred strolled into the lecture hall utterly unconcerned. "Where are your term papers?" I asked. One student replied, "Oh, don't worry, Prof, we're working on them. We'll have them for you in a couple of days, no sweat."

I picked up my lethal black grade book and began taking down names. "Johnson! Do you have your paper?" "No sir," came the reply. "F," I said as I wrote the grade in the book....The students reacted with unmitigated fury. They howled in protest, screaming, "That's not fair!"

The students had quickly taken my mercy for granted. They assumed it. When justice suddenly fell, they were unprepared for it. It came as a shock, and they were outraged. This is after only two doses of mercy in the space of two months.

Is this not the same way we treat God's grace and mercy in our lives sometimes? Jesus said something about this as well. Remember when some came and told him how Pilate mixed the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. They were outraged and wanted to see how Jesus would weight in. Jesus asked, "Do you think this happened to them because they were worse sinners? Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish!" The real miracle, Jesus is saying, is that this hasn't happened to everyone! But we don't think that way because we have come to expect mercy (it's how God is). In fact, we are shocked and outraged if he isn't merciful to everyone. But the New Testament teaches that he chooses who he has had mercy on (so if God has had mercy on you this morning, it's not because he had to or because you wanted it or earned it, but because he chose to be merciful to you).

Paul is teaching the Roman church why it is that only a remnant of Jews have come to believe in Jesus. He says it is according to God's electing grace: *"And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." As it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated."* Paul immediately anticipates what their response to this is (it's probably what many of you felt when you heard this read this morning).

The cry 'Unfair' God has to give everyone a chance. Paul goes on: *"What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills."* This is shocking until we recognize something: *if mercy is something owed then it's not mercy.* The fact that its mercy means I didn't deserve it but God gave it to me. If you ask me why I can only say God has been so amazingly gracious to you because he chose to.

Third, ***this chapter teaches us what that godly sorrow is that leads to repentance*** *"When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it."* (Jonah 3:10). This is one of the greatest examples of repentance in the entire Bible. An entire city of pagans who hated God, who hated the people of God repent at the preaching of Jonah. When reading the Hebrew text of this chapter it seems clear that it was the King who led in humbling himself before God.

He called for a fast and for everyone to clothe themselves in sackcloth including animals. Anyway you look at this story, this is biblical revival, massive revival changing peoples' hearts. If you know anything about those times when God sends revival to his people you will know that it begins with God's people repenting and being obedient. That's what we see in this chapter. At least outwardly, Jonah is now being obedient to the heavenly commission. Then, because of his obedience, God brings massive revival to this city.

But reading the text carefully, we learn some key elements that always accompany genuine repentance. But there is one statement that is the basis for everything that God did in Nineveh—*the people of Nineveh believed God.* They believed the word of God which Jonah had announced. In other words, God had caused them to believe in Him and trust that his word in the mouth of his prophet was true. And that faith which they exhibited produced works or actions that were evidence. First, ***they took seriously the Word of God*** (faith comes by hearing). They heard and they believed it and it benefited them. Some of us are like that generation in the wilderness of whom the writer of Hebrews says, *"For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened."*

Then, ***they acknowledged the sovereignty of God.*** They believed that God had sovereignly sent his servant to them with the word of God. They also believed that God had the right to judge them and destroy them (they didn't sit around debating the fairness of it). Then, ***they stressed the need for earnest supplication to God.*** *"Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God."* They realized that they were in such trouble, they all cried out to God. Jonathan Edwards records how that during the FGA, men and women and children would cry out to God as if they were in agony over their sins.

Then, ***they stressed the need to turn from known sins.*** *"Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands"* Assyria was known for its violence and that is the very thing the king said that they needed to turn from.

And finally, **they hoped for the salvation of God.** “Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.” True repentance never presumes upon God but it does hope in his mercy.

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The questions below are provided by Ed Rosen for you to use in House Church Group Discussions.

1. In what way is Christianity a religion for losers?
2. Why did God deal with Jonah in grace and mercy whereas He dealt with King Saul and Judas in judgment?
3. According to Scripture, what are we all owed by God? Explain.
4. In the Bible we learn that cities are very important to God. Why do you suppose this is true?
5. What are some examples of God’s providence in the book of Jonah?
6. One of Neil’s points was that God has ordained preaching as a means by which He saves people.
 - a. If God doesn’t need anyone to help Him do anything, why do you suppose He has chosen to use people preaching the gospel?
 - b. Is preaching (or sharing) the gospel something only for “preachers” or is it for all of the Lord’s disciples?
 - c. If you were asked to give someone a definition of the gospel, could you do it?
 - d. Do you regularly ask God for divine appointments to share the gospel?
 - e. How do you prepare yourself to hear the gospel on the Lord’s Day?
7. Neil’s second point was: That God saves anyone is miraculous.
 - a. Why did God have mercy on Nineveh but not on the Canaanites?
 - b. Why do we assume that all men deserve mercy rather than judgment?
 - c. What is your understanding of Romans chapter nine and the doctrine of election?
 - d. Why is the doctrine of election important, especially to you personally?
8. Finally, Neil said that the third chapter of Jonah teaches us that godly sorrow is what leads to repentance and gave us five things that the people of Nineveh did. Explain why each one is vitally important.
 - a. They took seriously the Word of God.
 - b. They acknowledged the sovereignty of God.
 - c. They stressed the need for earnest supplication to God.
 - d. They stressed the need to turn from known sin.
 - e. They hoped for the salvation of God.