

Preaching to the Nations
The Humbling of a Self-Righteous Missionary (Jonah 4)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on December 16, 2018

Introduction

- ❖ In the past few Sundays, we've been going through a mini-series in the book of Jonah with a particular focus on missions – as we lead up to our missions conference at the end of the month. Now I know when you think of Jonah, your first thought is probably about the whale and *not* about missions. The focus on Jonah and his adventures is totally understandable.
 - **But I would argue that global missions is at the heart of this well-known story.** In chapter 1 we already see how the LORD uses a very reluctant missionary to reveal himself to a crew of very pagan mariners. And then in chapter 3, God uses that same reluctant – but now reprovved – missionary to spark a revival in a wicked pagan city like Nineveh. **So far all the peoples in this book who are transformed by the grace of God have been Gentiles – not only people outside of the covenant community but people of very different languages, ethnicities, and cultures.** There is a missionary impulse in every chapter of this little book.

- ❖ So as we conclude this series by looking at chapter 4, I want to talk about what can really hinder the work of missions – about what could stifle the proclamation of the gospel among the nations of the earth. I'm not talking about the tightening of security in certain countries. I know those are present realities that make the task extremely difficult.
 - But the hindrance that chapter 4 talks about is not coming from external pressure or persecution. No, it comes from within. **It's an internal attitude and mindset. It comes down to self-righteousness.** It comes down to a sense of entitlement – to too high a view of yourself or of humanity in general.
 - Self-righteousness has a way of dampening missionary fervor in two different ways. **It can lead you to assume certain people don't deserve God's salvation or they don't even need it.** It's two different conclusions, but I'd argue both are rooted in self-righteousness and both hinder missions.

- ❖ **On one hand, a self-righteous attitude can lead you to treat certain people as less deserving of salvation.** We hear stories about religious extremists in a Muslim-dominate nation suicide-bombing churches or executing Christian missionaries, and some will react by saying, “If they don't want to hear about Jesus, if they're going to be that hostile, then move on. You tried your best. Move on to more a receptive people group.” **That's one way self-righteousness can express itself. We look past people that we deem undeserving.**
 - But there's another way self-righteousness can hinder missions. It was on display recently when we heard news about a remote tribal group that killed an American missionary. A common reaction was to criticize the missionary for disturbing this uncontacted, unengaged people group. “Leave them alone. Why are these Western imperialists imposing their religion on these innocent natives?”
 - **But that response is rooted in a naively optimistic assessment of humanity in general.** It assumes the existence of some sort of primitive innocence that we mustn't disturb. But that's just another form of self-righteousness.

- ❖ So whether you think certain people don't deserve God's salvation or don't need it – it's rooted in self-righteousness. And that's why it's toxic for missions. **Self-righteous people make terrible missionaries.** I think that's the main point of Jonah chapter 4.
 - This is morning I want to look at how self-righteousness affects missions. I've got three points: 1) Self-righteousness blinds us to the nature of mercy. 2) Self-righteousness dulls our compassion for the lost. 3) Self-righteousness must be confronted by the compassion of God.

Self-righteousness blinds us to the nature of mercy

- ❖ Let's consider how self-righteousness can blind us to the nature of mercy. This is seen in Jonah's reaction to the events of chapter 3. Remember last week, we saw how Jonah came around to heeding God's call to go to Nineveh and preach a message of doom and gloom. He warned the citizens about a coming overthrow of their great city in forty days.
 - **Now some people are going to consider that to be merciless.** How could God threaten to destroy a whole city including women and children? What happened to his mercy? But don't you see? **His threats and warnings are mercy.** Do you realize he didn't have to warn them? He didn't warn Sodom or Gomorrah. He just destroyed those cities. But God gave Nineveh a warning. He gave them a chance to respond favorably and repent. That's mercy. And for Jonah, that was a problem.

- ❖ At the conclusion of chapter 3, the Ninevites repent and God mercifully relents. Then it says in chapter 4:1, *“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.”* The Hebrew says, “it was exceedingly evil (*ra'ah*) to Jonah”. What was so evil?
 - The "it" in v1 is referring to what we read back in chapter 3:10, *“When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way (ra'), God relented of the disaster (ra'ah) that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.”*
 - What a contrast! **When the Ninevites turn from evil, God calls their turning away good and turns from his anger. But Jonah observes this turn of events and calls it evil.** He gets angry. To Jonah, this is all a disaster.

- ❖ V2 helps us get into his head. Now we know why he abandoned his mission back in chapter 1. **The irony is he didn't fear failure. He actually feared success.** He wasn't afraid these godless Ninevites would hurt him. He was afraid they'd actually listen to him and repent.
 - Look at v2, *“O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.”*

- ❖ In chapter 3, the king of Nineveh didn't know what kind of God they were dealing with. That's why he said in v9, *“Who knows?”* Let's repent and perhaps God may relent. They didn't know. But Jonah knew. He knew what kind of God this is. He just didn't care to share that knowledge. **Because he knew that this is a God who is so merciful that if a wicked king and a wicked people were to heed a divine warning – and one day, out of all the evil days of their existence, fall on their face in repentance – then God would relent.**

- ❖ The thought of it sickened Jonah. **God's steadfast love and mercy made him sick.** He goes on to say in v3 that he'd rather die than witness this show of mercy to the Ninevites. But again that's another bit of irony. Remember, back in chapter 2, Jonah was praising God for his mercy. While in the belly of the fish, **Jonah was thanking God for saving his life. But now he's asking God to take his life.** In the belly, he was so thankful for God's "*steadfast love*" (2:8). It was an attribute worth praising. But now he considers that same love as a weakness in God – as the reason why he spared the Ninevites.
 - Jonah is dealing with the same God and the same steadfast love and yet has completely different reactions. Why? What's the difference? **The difference is the object of God's steadfast love. In chapter 2, Jonah considered the object to be deserving, namely himself. But in chapter 4, the object of steadfast love – this wicked city of Nineveh – is undeserving.**

- ❖ It's clear by now that Jonah didn't fear the Ninevites. **He despised them.** He looked down on them. He felt superior to them. **And that's what we call self-righteousness.** It's where you agree that everyone is a sinner, but there are sinners and then there are SINNERS. I'm sure Jonah wouldn't hesitate to admit he's a sinner, but he probably justified himself by thinking, "*At least I'm not a Ninevite. Those guys are the real sinners. They're undeserving.*"
 - **So Jonah had no problem with the idea that God is merciful as long as his mercy is shown to the right people.** But that just proves he doesn't understand mercy. He's blind to its limitless nature. And self-righteousness is to blame. It convinces you that certain people are less deserving than you.

- ❖ **So when we see or hear testimonies of God's mercy in saving great sinners or saving collective groups who have been extremely hostile to the faith, there's often a deep suspicion in our initial reaction. We hesitate to call it a good thing.** Imagine if a confessed serial killer or child pornographer testifies to having trusted in Christ for salvation. Or imagine if ISIS members who are guilty of beheading Christians and bombing churches were to testify of having been saved by grace through faith. Imagine that all it took was one act of repentance and God turns from his fierce anger and relents. **He doesn't bring down on their heads a cold, hard justice but instead a loving, gentle mercy.**
 - What would you call that? Would you call it a good thing or is that evil? Is that a praiseworthy turn of events or is that a disaster, a travesty of justice? What would your reaction be? I admit it's hard to accept. **You can commit heinous atrocities and hurt so many people, and yet all it takes is one act of repentance?** How can God let them get away with it?

- ❖ First of all, keep this distinction in mind: **God can forgive someone for the most heinous and atrocious of sins – and yet that divine forgiveness does not negate nor render useless our human efforts to exact justice on earth.** So just because someone has been saved by the mercy of God doesn't mean they should be released from prison or should no longer be prosecuted for their crimes. **You can be forgiven in the courtroom of heaven but still be subject to human courts and systems of law and order.**

- ❖ Secondly, let's not confuse the gospel. **When God forgives great sinners of their great sins, he's not letting them get away with it.** No, all of their sins are completely and justly punished. The righteous sword of blind justice has fallen. But because of faith in Christ, it has fallen, not on their heads, but on the head of their Savior. That's the same gospel hope we cling to as Christians. **But self-righteousness will try to convince us that the sins of some people are categorically different than our own.**
 - No one would disagree that there's a difference between bombing a church full of worshippers and your prideful thoughts. **But you have to realize that – if the only sin Jesus was sent to atone for was your prideful thoughts, if that was his only mission – he still would've had to die on the cross.** In view of God's perfect holiness and justice, your conventional sins and the heinous sins of terrorists, murderers, and rapists all stand equally condemned and equally require the death of the Son of God for forgiveness to be made.
 - **Friends, the whole point of mercy is that no one deserves it.** God's steadfast love and mercy is freely given to the undeserving – and that includes us as much as it does those “great sinners” out there.
- ❖ Now what that means for missions is that there are no peoples in this world who are too idolatrous in their practices, or too entrenched in their ideologies, or too hostile towards Christianity – to be objects of the steadfast love and mercy of God. Self-righteous people don't see that, and that's why they make terrible missionaries. They're blind to the nature of God's mercy, which reenforces a callousness towards the lost.

Self-righteousness dulls our compassion for the lost

- ❖ This leads to our second point. Self-righteousness has a way of dulling our compassion for the lost. If we think some people don't deserve or need God's salvation, then it makes sense that we'll feel very little urgency to bring them the gospel. Let's see how this works in Jonah.
 - We left him in v3 complaining that he'd rather die than witness God showing mercy to the Ninevites. And in v4, God confronts his attitude by asking him, “*Do you do well to be angry?*” Jonah, are you justified in your anger? Are you right to feel that way? Now Jonah doesn't respond. Maybe he's giving God the silent treatment. **But clearly he thinks he has the right to be angry.** He thinks God's not angry enough.
- ❖ If we keep reading in v5, it says he, “*went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city.*” So he wants to sit back and see if God really did relent. Maybe God might change his mind and destroy the city after all.
 - Now as he waits, the sun is unbearable. So in v6, God appoints a plant to spring up over Jonah. The text says he was “*exceedingly glad because of the plant*”. **There's finally a smile on his face, the moment mercy starts blowing his way.** Notice how v6 says God gave him the plant “*to save him from his discomfort (ra'ah)*”.

- ❖ Again, that's the same Hebrew word used earlier for "*evil*". There's a double meaning here. On one level, God is shading Jonah from his discomfort. **But on a deeper level, God is saving Jonah from his own evil.** He's trying to expose Jonah's self-righteousness.
- ❖ And God does it by taking away his plant the very next day. In v7, it says the next day God appoints a worm to destroy the plant and then sends a scorching east wind, and once again Jonah is furious. "Take me now, Lord!" "*It is better for me to die than to live.*" (v8)
 - So again Jonah expresses his desire to die, like he did back in v3. Same desire but notice the different triggers. **In v3, Jonah is disgusted when he sees God showing mercy to the Ninevites instead of justice.** "Why are you being so compassionate to them? God, you don't make any sense. Just let me die."
 - **But here in v8, God is all about justice and no mercy – the very thing Jonah wanted.** He gives Jonah exactly what he deserves – a scorching. And he complains, "Lord, why aren't you being more compassionate to me? God, you don't make any sense. Just let me die."
 - **The problem is he doesn't see his own wickedness. Jonah still doesn't think he's sinful to the core.** He believes the Ninevites certainly are. They deserve bad things to happen to them. But not him!
- ❖ In v9, God asks once again if he's justified to feel so angry – this time over the plant. To which Jonah answers, "*Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.*" But then in vv10-11, the Lord shows the absurdity of his reaction and how he lacks any compassion for the lost.
 - "¹⁰*And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night."* **In other words, Jonah you have so much compassion for this plant but you're not even its creator. You've only known this plant for a day.** One day! And you're upset.
 - But I, God, am the creator of these Ninevites, and I've endured their wickedness with great forbearance for centuries. Nineveh is a very old city. The Lord is using a *how much more* argument. If Jonah has such pity for this plant, *how much more* pity should God have for this city?
 - But Jonah's self-righteousness has dulled his compassion and hardened his heart. **He apparently has more compassion for a dead plant than for spiritually dead people.**
- ❖ Church, let's be sure to check our own hearts. **We might look at Jonah in shock – that he could be so calloused and care about a lost plant so much more than lost people.** But then we realize that we do the same thing. We tend to react in the same way when we lose the smallest of comforts or the most gratuitous of luxuries.
 - **Think about how sad we get when we lose our phone or when we misplace our wallet or purse.** Everything comes to a stop. We drop whatever we're doing and our only focus is to find that lost item. We're retracing our steps, going back to the restaurant, logging onto our spouse's Find My Phone app. And if we can't find it, it completely ruins our day – our week more likely.

- ❖ **We pity the loss of these minor comforts and conveniences.** We pity our lost phone, our lost wallet, our lost purse. **But do we pity our lost neighbors, our lost classmates and colleagues, or the billions of lost people in unreached regions of the earth?**

- ❖ According to one of the most authoritative sources on unreached peoples, the Joshua Project¹, it says that out of the 17,000 distinct people groups in the world **42%** are considered unreached (7,080 groups). And by “unreached”, it means these people groups lack enough Christians and resources to evangelize their own people without outside assistance.
 - Now the vast majority (83%; 5,900 in total) of these unreached people groups live in what is known as **the 10/40 window**. This region belongs primarily in the eastern hemisphere located between 10 and 40 degrees north of the equator. Now many of these 10/40 countries are closed to missionaries. They don’t want you there. They’re not inviting you to bring the gospel. Many will arrest you or kill you if you try.

- ❖ **But what’s so sad is that these UPGs are not all living deep in some rainforest or on some remote island totally cut off from modern civilization.** No, if you were to travel to most of these places you wouldn’t have to search very hard to get a Coke or a Big Mac.
 - That’s sad. As David Platt puts it, “*A soft drink company has done a better job getting brown sugar water to the nations than the church of Jesus Christ has done in getting the Gospel to them.*” So many peoples in the world who don’t have access to the gospel – who are lost in their sins and heading towards an eternal hell.

- ❖ Church, do we get sad over that? We pity the lost iPhone but do we pity the lost soul? We have so much compassion for inanimate objects and we’ll drop everything to find them. **How much more compassion and urgency and priority should we have for the lost in the world** – especially those living in unreached lands without a chance to hear about Jesus?

- ❖ I’ve been reading all the news accounts about **John Chau**, the American missionary who was recently killed by the natives on North Sentinel Island. There are plenty criticizing him, and even fellow Christians are questioning his methods. And I think there’s legitimate debate over that. **But I would be weary of questioning his motives.**
 - With the release of his journal entries, it becomes clear that he truly pitied the Sentinelese. He saw that they are human beings created in the same image of our Creator, and they share the same fallen condition as all of us and without redemption in Christ, they’ll pass through this life and into the next to face judgment.
 - **Before we make a critical comment about John Chau’s methods, we ought to commend his compassion and confess how dull and callous ours is in comparison.** We ought to thank the Lord for this brother and hope that his sacrifice fuels a greater compassion for the lost in all of us.

¹ see online: <https://joshuaproject.net/assets/media/handouts/status-of-world-evangelization.pdf>

Self-righteousness must be confronted by the compassion of God

- ❖ But for that to happen, we need to confront our self-righteousness. And the best way is to confront the great and merciful compassion of God in the gospel. This leads to our third point. If we want to root out the self-righteousness in our hearts, then it must be confronted by the compassion of God.
 - Look with me at what the Lord says in v11, "*And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?*"

- ❖ **What's interesting is that the word for *pity* literally refers to having tears in one's eyes.** It's used all over the OT. Usually it's telling the Israelites not to pity the one under God's judgment. You'll read verses that say things like, "*Your eye shall not pity them.*" "*Your eye shall have no pity.*" (Deut. 7:16; 13:8; 19:13) It's always connected with the eyes. And it's basically saying – don't shed a tear for them.
 - **But here God is saying he pities Nineveh. He is shedding a tear for them.** The Lord is crying for their salvation. If you look at v11, he highlights two reasons why.

- ❖ **First, he point to the sheer size of Nineveh.** God is so moved to pity because we're talking about 120,000 souls. 120,000 image bearers of God who are heading to either one of two destinations: eternal life or eternal condemnation. That's why he's crying.
 - **The second reason is because the Ninevites don't know their right hand from their left.** That's an idiom for their spiritual confusion and lostness. It's referring to their inability to make right moral judgments. Now that doesn't lead God to overlook their wickedness, but it does move God to pity them *in spite of* their wickedness.

- ❖ And that's how the book ends. **The book of Jonah ends with God weeping over a great city.** It's quite dramatic and it's quite unique. You don't see an image like that in Scripture until you get to the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 19, it's the first Palm Sunday and Jesus is riding on a donkey into the great city of Jerusalem.
 - **Luke 19:41 says he draws near to the city and begins to weep.** In Matthew's account of the same event, he records Jesus weeping and saying, "*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!*" (Mt. 23:37)
 - Jesus doesn't discount or ignore the fact that Jerusalem has killed the prophets of God. They've committed heinous crimes. And yet they're not too far gone beyond his compassion. **Unlike Jonah, Jesus weeps for the lost.**

- ❖ In many ways, Jesus functions as an anti-type to Jonah. His obedience and compassion are set in contrast to the OT prophet. **In fact, in Luke 11:32, Jesus actually describes himself as a Greater Jonah.**

- ❖ And it makes sense when you think about it. In our story, Jonah goes outside the city to root for its destruction. **But in the gospel story, Jesus goes outside the city to rescue it (Heb. 13:12) – to accomplish salvation by dying on a cross for the forgiveness of sins.**
- ❖ God's tears shed for sinners in Jonah 4 find their ultimate expression in the cross of Christ. **At the cross, we're confronted by God's compassion at its fullest. He pities poor sinners like you and me, and in Christ, he dies in our place.** He turns aside his own fierce anger and relents from bringing down judgment on our heads.
 - But in showing such mercy, in his willingness to relent, God in no way neglects or violates his justice. Because the gospel tells us that justice will always be served *in the end*. Evil and evildoers will never get away *in the end*.
 - **Because *in the end*, for every person, justice will either fall on your head on the last day OR justice will have already fallen on the head of your Savior when he died on the cross in your place.**
- ❖ Friends, what will happen to you on that last day? **Is justice still coming for you or has it already been served through your Savior?** This book of Jonah demonstrates that God is more than willing to forgive you, to show compassion. If you have yet to turn from your evil ways and receive his mercy, today is the day of salvation. Cry out to him today.
- ❖ Now for us Christians, we need the compassion of God to confront and expose the self-righteousness that's still in our hearts. Whether we're tempted to think some people don't deserve salvation or others don't need it – the gospel confront us. **The gospel says that we are *all* more sinful than we assume but God is more merciful than we imagined.** Everyone needs salvation. No one deserves it. But God offers it freely in Christ. His compassion and mercy know no end. So let there be no end to our prayers and our efforts to tell the lost about this God of compassion.