

SESSION TWENTY-ONE

JONAH

Jonah Learns God's Lesson

PREFACE

If you would ask most people what the book of Jonah was primarily about, I suspect that most would say it is about Nineveh's repentance. Of the four chapters in the book, however, only one is devoted to Nineveh's repentance. The other three all deal with God's work in Jonah's life. In ch 1, we see Jonah's rebellion. In ch 2, Jonah is disciplined. In ch 3, we have Nineveh's repentance. In ch 4, Jonah is disciplined again and taught a valuable lesson. This leads me to the conclusion that the book is primarily about Jonah and what God needed to do to change him. Not surprisingly, the fourth and final chapter of the book holds the key to the primary message of the book. The following is a sermon that I once gave on Jonah chapter four at a Chinese Missionary Conference in Baguio City, Philippines in Dec 1983. I present it here, as it will serve two purposes: (1) it will bring out the primary message of the book, and (2) it will demonstrate how this could be preached.

INTRODUCTION

A. Story

One of my favorite past-times is to have an exciting game of tennis. From the days of playing for my tennis team in high school, I have relished the opportunity to spend a warm sunny afternoon on the tennis court. And I hope that some day my two children will also learn to play the game that I have grown to love so much. But right now they are too young (ages 4 & 6). However, I have wanted them to begin learning coordination for hitting the ball. So, I took a long piece of cord . . . suspended one end to a high ceiling on our porch and fastened a tennis ball to the other. Then I gave my children a small racket and told them to practice.

Now that tennis ball hangs from that cord 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But do you know when they most want to play? Whenever the other one is using it! "It's my turn." "You've had the racket too long." "You never let me play." Sound familiar? There is plenty of opportunity for both of them to pound that tennis ball all they want, but it is when one has the racket that the other most wants a turn. If almost kills them to see the other getting a turn and having the fun, even though they both can play all they want. In America, we have a word for that . . . *stingy!*

B. Relation to Jonah

Stinginess is a real problem in small children, isn't it? Unfortunately, it does not disappear altogether with the advancement of age. We not only have stingy children, but we have stingy teenagers. And stingy teenagers turn into stingy collegians. And there are even many adults who are just as stingy as a five year old child. I'm sure that I'm not immune from it myself. But I'm not alone. There are other Christians who, if they were honest, would have to admit that they, too, are still infected by this ugly sin.

Now I don't want to give you the impression that my message this morning is a lecture on being stingy. But it is related, because Christians can be stingy about God's mercy. [Pause]. Jonah was. Jonah relished the fact that God was merciful to him, but he despised the thought that the

people of Nineveh might also taste of the mercy and compassion of His God. That's why he ran from God in the first place. He wasn't scared of the Ninevites (though they were a fierce people). He wasn't a "softy," too much of a weakling to make the long journey to Nineveh. And I don't even think it was because of what his fellow Israelites might think of him. Of course the Ninevites didn't deserve any grace from God. No one deserves grace . . . that's what makes it different from merit. God sent Jonah to Nineveh because He longed in His divine heart that these lost multitudes would turn to Him while there was still time and be spared. But Jonah didn't share God's outlook . . . God's mercy . . . God's compassion. And the book will not end until Jonah awakens to what God's compassion is really like. That's why I want to spend this last time together concentrating on chapter four of Jonah. The greatest miracle in the book is not the conversion of Nineveh, but the change in the prophet himself. For God has more trouble with Jonah than He does with Nineveh.

The lesson for Jonah is really our message too:

Our stinginess of God's mercy must give way to His unbounded compassion for the lost!

JONAH PREACHES GOD'S MESSAGE (CH 3)

Very quickly I want to read through ch 3, make a few comments and then move on to ch 4 as quickly as we can. [Read 3:1]. In verse one, the words "the second time" stand out boldly. Our God is the God of a second chance! Jonah had been given a commission by God, but he failed God in a miserable way. In fact he nearly caused the death of a shipload of innocent sailors as he walked out of the will of God. My study of Jonah leads me to the conclusion that when he "fled from the presence of the Lord," he was saying good-bye forever to the ministry (and I think he meant it).

Application

There is not a Christian in this room who has not "blown it" at one time or another. And maybe you've "blown it" to the extent that you don't think the Lord will ever use you again. Can I say something to you? You are not the first to feel that way. The apostle Peter felt the same way when he denied the Lord three times. And there are many times I myself have stumbled in my Christian life. I have been at the point where I felt that I wrecked my life so much as a Christian that I didn't even believe God could ever respond to me again. Oh, if you feel that way right now, you're not the first. As long as you're still alive, God is still the God of a second chance. The way back to him begins with earnest confession and repentance. He can restore you!

Now let us go on to see how God does use His restored prophet [read 3:2-10]. "Who knows?" the king cries. "Who knows?" I suppose he had gathered all his cabinet officials into his office to assess the crisis situation, for Jonah had proclaimed judgment. As the men stood gloom-faced around the conference table, the king expressed hope, and I think he had good reason. For one thing, Jonah had said "yet forty days" and no doubt he pondered why they were given any time at all . . . surely he thought (and correctly so), God must be giving opportunity for repentance. Furthermore, God never had to go to the trouble of sending a prophet to warn them; He could have brought unforewarned judgment. The fact that God announced the impending doom was in itself an indication that he was a God of mercy who delighted more in repentance than in judgment. Centuries later, the apostle Peter would inscribe the same conclusion, "The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance?" (2 Pet 3:9). God has His elect and He shall never fail in bringing every last one into the safety of His salvation in Christ. There will not be any panic on God's part at the last moment before Jesus returns. He will have brought every one of His elect to Himself.

Transition

God delights to give opportunity for repentance . . . He is the God of mercy. But what about Jonah? Is he zealous to see others enter into God's mercy, or is he stingy about God's mercy? The repentance of Nineveh is not the climax of the book. Yes, the evangelistic campaign has been accomplished and the statistics have all been reported, but there is a greater climax to the book yet coming. The book which began with Jonah and God has now returned to Jonah and God. Nineveh must fade out of the picture—indeed, the repentance of Nineveh in Jonah's day gave a very lengthy extension of life to this Assyrian stronghold. In fact, Nineveh would last well over a hundred years, for it was not until 612 BC that Nineveh finally fell. For the meantime, the business at Nineveh was finished . . . but not God's work in His prophet!

A. Jonah's Displeasure over God's Mercy (4:1-4)

As we come to Jonah chapter four, we may be shocked to find that the mighty prophet of old is still very human. Now his true feelings come out. [Read 4:1]. The Hebrew text says something like "and it was hot to him" which I suppose is their way of saying that Jonah became a little bit hot under the collar. Does this seem strange to you that this man in the ministry of our Lord was actually repulsed by the results of Nineveh? Why would this be? The answer is seen in Jonah's prayer of vs 2 [read vv 2-3]. Listen to these revealing words: he knows that this God is gracious and compassionate, but this knowledge of his has not yet been absorbed by his own heart. One writer has said, "he had not yet learned to look beyond the horizon of his own people to the wideness of God's mercy" [Frank Gaebelien].

Application

Yes, there is a wideness in God's mercy. It extends beyond ourselves, beyond our families, beyond our own race . . . beyond our own countrymen. There is a wider brotherhood of men on earth that not all have eyes to see. God's mercy must not be bounded. There is a statement in the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus that certainly is a truth: "As is His majesty, so is His mercy!" [Repeat]. All of creation testifies to the majesty of God, but He is just as merciful as He is majestic! God's mercy is for all, and when we come "just as we are" to the cross and find forgiveness in Jesus we become part of God's family to which none are barred. With our new life, we find that our citizenship is in heaven. The fact that I am American by birth is now secondary to the fact that I am first and foremost a Christian.

Illustration

I came from a very conservative town in Texas, and a town which like many others had not yet overcome the prejudices against the black people of our country. I can remember very clearly growing up in a community in which black children were not allowed to go to the same school as I did. Only as I grew older was this injustice done away with. But I remember all the things that people said about black people, as though they were something sub-human. When I was 21 years old, a senior in college, I received the Lord into my life. Seven years later I was privileged to minister in Liberia, West Africa. There I met a young black African boy and we developed a close friendship. He was hungry to know the truths of God's Word, and so for several hours each week I taught him the things I had come to know and treasure. I still communicate with him even to this day. Allow me to read an excerpt from a recent letter:

Blessed and wonderful greetings to you from me, your son and brother in Christ, residing in Liberia, who longs to hear from you in every moment of your life and if

possible most of all desires to be with you. . . . I desire and am thinking about going to bible college one of these days if all goes well. Please pray with me on this issue if this is the Lord's will for me let Him make every one of the needs possibly available. And of course, I need your comment. May God bless you richly, Saikante Kun.

There is a wideness in God's mercy that binds us one in Him. Our stinginess of God's mercy must give way to His unbounded compassion for the lost! This stinginess can run very deep; it certainly did for Jonah, for it even brought him to a point of wanting God to take his life rather than having to yield to the way God Himself was. This is not a very pretty picture of Jonah but at least he took his complaint to God and God heard that prayer. Notice vs 4 [read vs 4]—God is saying to Jonah, "I hear your prayer, but is your complaint really legitimate?" Notice that God does not grant his request for death. Many are the foolish prayers of the saints of God which we are fortunate God in His grace does not answer! God knows us so well . . . every thought and motive of the heart is intimately known by Him. God is not fooled by Jonah's haphazard request to die. God knows that is just a cover-up for Jonah's real problem (anger), and thus God puts His finger ever so gently on Jonah's sin: "Jonah, be honest now, do you really have a reasonable ground for this 'anger' of yours?"

B. God's Object Lesson for Jonah (4:5-8)

Verses 1-4 revealed that Jonah did not know God's compassion. Now, verses 5-8 demonstrate Jonah's selfishness.

God responded to Jonah's prayer, but notice that Jonah did not answer God's question. God was right: there was no legitimate or reasonable grounds for Jonah to be angry. But this friend Jonah of ours is a stubborn fellow. He crawls off to see whether Nineveh will yet receive God's judgment [read vs 5].

Perhaps Jonah was waiting to see how long Nineveh could keep up this change of behavior. Jonah reminds us of someone else that God's Word has introduced us to: the elder brother of the prodigal son. In the parable of the prodigal son, we are given a picture of the heart of God who always rejoices in the return of a son to Him. But strangely, there is this elder brother who was not big enough to rejoice in the forgiveness of this returning brother. Jonah is just like that—he finds no joy in the repentance of the Ninevites . . . he is unsympathetic. This problem in his attitude displeases the Lord, and God conceives a little object lesson to shake Jonah out of this. [Read vv 6-8].

One might think that Jonah had deep psychological problems, for he seems to be suicide prone. He wants to die when he sees the Ninevites repenting, and he wants to die when his little shade tree withers, thus removing this protection from the blistering hot sun.

We also notice that Jonah is never late for God's appointments: God appointed a great fish, God appointed a plant, God appointed a worm, and God appointed a scorching east wind.

Of the four, Jonah liked only one—Jonah really appreciated that plant. In fact, Jonah is more happy over that plant than he is over the repentance of the 120,000 Ninevites. That plant is his comfort . . . with it he had protection. Without it, he was miserable. But the reason he has it is because God was compassionate towards him. Jonah didn't deserve the tree . . . he didn't work for the tree . . . he didn't take care of the tree. But God had compassion on Jonah by giving him this shade tree. God was under no obligation to give Jonah this shade tree, and God was just as righteous when He took the shade tree anyway. But it sure upset ole Jonah when God withdrew

His compassion on Jonah. Jonah is stingy. He likes God's compassion, but he doesn't care that others also receive God's compassion. He is stingy . . . he is selfish.

Illustration

One of my professors used to say, "A life that is wrapped up in itself makes a very small package."

C. **The Final Dialogue (4:9-11)**

Once again, God heard Jonah's prayer . . . his begging for death, and so God comes closer (so to speak) for a little talk with Jonah [read 4:9-11].

God says to him, "You had compassion on that plant." But Jonah did not create the plant . . . he did not nourish it . . . and furthermore, the plant had no eternal value. Jonah only cared for the plant as long as there was some benefit in it for him.

Brothers and sisters, look long and hard at those little words in vs 11: "Should I not have compassion?" This is the real message of the whole book! Listen, and you can sense the heart-throb of God Himself: "Jonah, I would like to say something to you. You didn't create that plant, but I created all these people in Nineveh. You didn't nourish that plant, but day after day I give life to them and care for them. And Jonah, there is one thing more: You felt a sense of loss over that plant which is only a temporary, inanimate object. And how do you think I feel as the Creator over 120,000 individuals who are headed to an eternity without Christ?"

"Should I not have compassion? Should I not have pity?" Those words come thundering from the very heart of God . . . a loving God who desperately wants to pour out His compassion to those who are lost. Yes, this is the heart of the book. In fact, it is the heart of missions . . . God who has compassion and pity on those dead in sin. But it also reveals the heart of a servant of God whose heart was not touched with the passion of God in missions.

I think God would have said some more to Jonah also. "Jonah, furthermore, you said you wished to die. I'm not going to take your life. But there will come a time when I will take a life . . . it will be the life of My own Son. You felt the loss of a plant. But Jonah, I shall have the pain of the loss of My Son, because of the way I love these whom you have had no compassion for."

Our stinginess of God's mercy must give way to His unbounded compassion for the lost!

CONCLUSION

We have been with Jonah for sometime now. We fled with him when he first set sail from Joppa. We crawled into the hold of the ship and tried to escape with him. We were discovered . . . caught sleeping . . . with him, when we should have been awake. We refused to repent and went into the sea with Jonah. We slithered down the throat of the great fish and agonized with Jonah but came to see that God is able to deliver His own from the despair of discipline when they cry out to Him and yield themselves to His will. We walked with Jonah into the colossal city of Nineveh and proclaimed the truth to those in darkness.

Oh, but I wish we would do one more thing with Jonah. The text does not say it, but I think Jonah's heart was changed. I think he was convicted in his soul about his uncaring, uncompassionate, stingy attitude. I think the whole book was written as a confession by Jonah about what God taught him, "Should I not have compassion?" If we listen closely, I think we can hear the faint voice of an ancient prophet of Israel: "Yes, Lord, indeed you do have compassion for the lost, and now I also do."