

This morning, I am finishing up my sermon series through the Old Testament book of Jonah, which is a masterfully told story with a great deal of relevance to our lives today. Over the last four weeks, we looked at the chapters 1-3 of Jonah and talked about how God called Jonah and calls us to find our identity and purpose in Him and to share His message with others. But Jonah, like many of us, rejected that call. Instead of submitting to that call and finding true purpose and freedom, he decided to run as far as he could from God's call. We saw that although he boarded a ship and tried to sail as far as he could in the opposite direction from where God wanted him to go, he could not escape from God's omnipresent sovereignty. As others on the ship experience a storm of suffering because of Jonah's disobedience, it becomes evident that the only way to survive will be for Jonah to be thrown overboard, to submit himself to God's saving discipline. And so, the sailors reluctantly throw Jonah overboard, where God provides a great fish to swallow him up. And in the belly of the great fish, Jonah prays to God and acknowledges that those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs, and that salvation comes from the Lord. He is willing, finally, to go to Ninevah, where he preaches the warning message God has given him – "forty more days and Ninevah will be overturned," and incredibly, Ninevah repents of their sin, and God forgives them.

Jonah 3:10 - *When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.*

Now if this were a modern Christian movie, the story would end after chapter 3 with a very neat and tidy resolution. Jonah experienced God's grace and mercy, learned his lesson, obeyed God, preached the message God gave him, and Ninevah repented and turned to God. But the Bible is not neat and tidy, and Jonah's story does not end there.

Jonah 4:1-11 - *But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. ² He prayed to the LORD, "O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. ³ Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." ⁴ But the LORD replied, "Have you any right to be angry?" ⁵ Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to*

ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that **he grew faint**. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live." ⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." ¹⁰ But the LORD said, **"You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"**

In the last chapter of this book, we finally see why Jonah did not want to go to Ninevah. It was not fear of being persecuted or killed. It was prejudice against a violent enemy of Israel and a desire to see them judged and destroyed, not saved.

That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Remember that whether Jonah is a historical story or a parable using a historical figure, the book of Jonah is meant to hold up a mirror held up to the original listeners as well as to us today. The story ends with a question: **"Should I not be concerned about that great city?"** And by asking that question, God and the author confront the listeners with that same question. God is asking: is it wrong for me to love and be concerned for your enemies, Jonah, or for those who are different than you? **Should you not share in my concern and compassion?** I believe that the mirror of the book of Jonah confronts us with an attitude we need to avoid and an attitude we need to adopt.

1) **Avoid tribal pride that leads you to hate, exclude, or dismiss others**

By tribal I mean religious or nationalistic or any other kind of group pride that causes you to hate, exclude, or dismiss those who are not a part of your tribe.

As I read Jonah, this seems to be a clear confrontational message of the book. We have Jonah, a prophet of God, called by God to bring a message of warning to an enemy of his nation. And Jonah does not want to go, because he wants them to be destroyed. And when he finally does go, and preaches the message, and they repent, he throws a fit because he did not want God to show them mercy. **Jonah**

loved his nation, Israel, but he loved it in a way that included a hatred and callousness towards his nation's enemies.

Clearly we are living in an increasingly polarized world, where plenty of people take pride in their tribe, whether political or religious or some other identity marker. And very often, along with this pride comes a hatred, exclusion, or dismissing of the other, of those who are not like you. Ironically, we are even in a month called pride month, which is a great example of tribalism and polarization and the hatred, exclusion and dismissal of others who think and act differently that can occur. But God challenges that attitude in the book of Jonah, and confronts the kind of tribal pride that leads to hatred, exclusion, or dismissal of others, challenging Jonah, Israel, and us to a better way of living.

Christians are by no means exempt from this kind of tribal pride. Any time you are part of a tribe or community, there is the temptation to adopt a kind of pride that leads to hatred, exclusion, and the dismissal of others. And for some Christians, they even go as far as to adopt a Christian nationalism, or worse, white Christian nationalism, believing that America is meant to be a Christian nation and that "God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society." In fact, a recent poll from the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution found that around a third of Americans believe that our government should declare this a Christian nation. Now, it's one thing to try to influence our culture by our Christian faith, or to love your country in a patriotic way. There is nothing wrong with that. But it is another thing to have a kind of nationalistic and religious pride that leads to hatred, exclusion, or dismissal of others who believe or think differently.

Why is this kind of attitude wrong for the Christian?

1) We know that we are only right with God because of His grace

Ephesians 2:8-9 - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.

If we are saved by grace, then how can we look down on anyone else? We can only boast in the Lord, not in ourselves. In the belly of the great fish, Jonah recognized that it is all about God's grace, His covenant faithfulness, His undeserved love. But the book of Jonah reveals that Israel often saw themselves as superior because they were God's chosen people, and looked down on others with

an attitude of hatred, exclusion, and dismissal. But they forgot that it was all the grace of God, not something that they had earned.

Deuteronomy 6:10-12 - *When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you-- a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, ¹¹ houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant-- then when you eat and are satisfied, ¹² be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*

And we sometimes do the same.

1 Corinthians 4:7 - *For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?*

But it is all grace. An undeserved gift. We are just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.

2) We know our true enemy is a spiritual one

Ephesians 6:10-12 - *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. ¹¹ Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

Recently a political leader gave a speech in which he misquoted Ephesians:

“You gotta be ready for battle. So put on the full armor of God, take a stand against the left’s schemes, stand firm with the belt of truth buckled around your waist. You will face fire from flaming arrows, but the shield of faith will protect you,”

What is the implication here? **That our struggle is not against the devil but against the political left.** That the right is on the side of God and the left is a tool of Satan. This is a clear example of a kind of pride that leads to the demonization of the other and promotes hatred, exclusion, and dismissal by mistakenly believing that there are two kinds of people: good and evil, instead of recognizing as Paul said in Romans 3:22-23:

Romans 3:22-23 - *There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

Or, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it, “*The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.*”

Or, as British author and Christian G. K. Chesterton reportedly said when a newspaper in London sent out an inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, “What’s wrong with the world today?”, “Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton.”

3) We do not fight our battles as the world does

2 Corinthians 10:3-6 - *For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. ⁴ The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish **strongholds**. ⁵ We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. ⁶ And we will be ready to punish every act of disobedience, once your obedience is complete.*

Revelation 12:11 - *They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.*

We are not called to expand the kingdom of God through the means of the world, through power and political dominion. The church has always grown through sacrificial service and testimony to the gospel, through prayer. When the church lusts after political power in order to force the culture into morality, it usually harms the church and does not convince anyone of the gospel, because salvation does not come through adopting moral behavior.

Christians are called not to a tribal dominion of the culture but to seek the welfare of the city in which we are presently exiled.

Jeremiah 29:7 - *Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*

In a nation in which we have the privilege of democratic citizenship, seeking our city’s welfare means loving our neighbors by voting for justice and righteousness.

It does not mean securing our tribe's predominance or ensuring the nation makes our culture central to its identity.

There is a better way than adopting a tribal pride that leads to hatred, exclusion, and dismissal of others:

2) **The attitude to adopt is compassion towards all**

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

You are concerned about this plant, which is here and gone, but you're only concerned because of your selfishness, because of how the plant served you. You did not have the devotion of the gardener, who planted it, tended it, watched it grow and then saw it die. What is God's point? Even though the Ninevites are lost in their violence, I created them. I love them. I am concerned about them. And I want them to be saved, not destroyed. This is the compassionate heart of God:

God is compassionate towards all he has made:

***Psalm 145:8-9** - The LORD is gracious and **compassionate**, slow to anger and rich in love. ⁹ The LORD is good to all; he has **compassion** on all he has made.*

And so he is patient, calling people to turn from the sinful self-centeredness to know Him:

***Joel 2:12-13** - 'Even now,' declares the LORD, 'return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.' ¹³ Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and **compassionate**, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*

Adopting a tribal pride leads to hatred, exclusion, and the dismissal of others. But there is a better way. How are we to gain this heart of compassion?

1) **Be transformed by God's compassion for you as displayed on the cross**

But the gospel declares that we are all sinners who have fallen short, and that Jesus came to die for all of us. We are all in the same boat, and Jesus' death is God's compassionate love for us in action:

John 3:16-18 - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

Even the prophet Isaiah foretold His death for His people:

Isaiah 49:14-16 - *But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me." ¹⁵ "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! ¹⁶ See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.*

Jonah's lack of grace and compassion towards the Ninevites displays a lack of understanding of God's grace and compassion towards him. It is very similar to the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18, who even though he is forgiven a billion dollars, refuses to forgive his fellow servant \$100, because he has forgotten that he has been pardoned a much greater debt.

2) Recognize that people act in ignorance.

¹⁰ *But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"*

They don't know their left hand from their right. They are lost, acting in ignorance. Let that give you compassion towards them, for you would likely do the same thing if you were in their shoes, raised in their culture with their values. Paul understood this:

1 Timothy 1:12-14 - *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. ¹³ Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy*

because I acted in **ignorance** and unbelief. ¹⁴ The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

And even as Jesus was dying on the cross, he displayed compassion because he saw their ignorance:

Luke 23:33-34 - When they came to the place called the Skull, there they crucified him, along with the criminals-- one on his right, the other on his left. ³⁴ Jesus said, "**Father, forgive them**, for they do not know what they are doing."

One of the greatest ways to gain a heart of compassion is to see, as Jesus did, that many people act in ignorance. They don't know their left hand from their right. They are blind people being led by blind people. They don't know what they are doing.

3) **Understand that their eternal destiny is at stake**

Finally, true compassion comes from recognizing the stakes – eternity.

2 Peter 3:9 - The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

1 Timothy 2:1-4 - I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- ² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. ³ This is good, and pleases God our Savior, ⁴ who wants **all men to be saved** and **to come to a knowledge of the truth**.

Jonah is not to look down on others with a tribalistic pride. But neither is he to leave everyone alone, just let everyone do their own thing and call it good. God calls Ninevah out for the wickedness and violence, calling them to repent. Similarly, we can distance ourselves from the world and let them go to hell. Or we can mistakenly believe that everyone is good as they are with no need for God. But the truth is that everyone needs God, and the salvation that Jesus offers. We are not to isolate but to love our neighbor, to go into all the world and to make disciples, because the eternal destiny of every individual is at stake.

As C.S. Lewis put it in *The Weight of Glory*: "It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter; it is hardly possible for him to think

too often or too deeply about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden of my neighbour's glory should be laid on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken. It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most interesting person you can talk to may one day **be a creature which**, if you say it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, **all play, all politics**. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilisations – these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit – immortal horrors or everlasting splendours.”

God calls Jonah – and Israel, and us – out for being more concerned about the vine, about things that serve our self-interest, than about the great city, about people God created and will live forever as immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.

Go love that great city. Have compassion as I have had compassion on you. Seek the peace and prosperity of the city in which you live.