

The God of Compassion

Jonah 4:4-11

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Colonel Harland Sanders (Mr. KFC) was once on a plane where there was a screaming infant just a few seats behind him. The parents and flight attendants tried every trick they could think of, but the baby just kept crying. Finally, Colonel Sanders asked if he could hold the baby. The frustrated parents agreed, and soon the Colonel gently rocked the infant to sleep. Later another passenger said to Sanders, "We all appreciate what you did for us, sir." The Colonel responded, "I didn't do it for us. I did it for the baby." Friends, that is an example of compassion. The dictionary defines it as "a sympathetic consciousness of other's distress together with a desire to alleviate it." The bible describes it as "looking out not for your own interests, but for the interests of another person's." Today, as we look at our text we will see that Jonah is not a very compassionate man. There is an implied warning from the Lord...Do not be like him. But will also see that the Lord is a very compassionate God. And this is a source of great, really great encouragement. Let's pause and pray the Lord would enable us to hear and heed his word today.

Ok, quick review. After all the people of Nineveh listened to Jonah's message, they repent of their sin and seemingly turn to the Lord. In response, the Lord relents of the destruction he had threatened and spares the city. This angers Jonah. The Ninevites were enemies of Israel. He wanted to wipe out the entire population. And he is angry at the Lord for not doing that. He actually accuses him of being too "soft" on evil pagans. Now, we talked last week about how messed up Jonah is in his thinking and attitudes. He was a recipient of grace. God had rescued him and spared him from judgement he deserved. He realized that while he was in the belly of the fish (chapter 2). But, now he has no feelings of nay grace or compassion towards the Ninevites. And he is mad at God for showing them grace and

compassion. At this point, we might expect the text to read, "And God sent a great lightning bolt and fried Jonah." That did not happen. Instead...**Jonah 4:4b The Lord asked, is it right for you to be angry?** The question reveals that he has not given up on Jonah, yet.

4:5 Jonah left the city and found a place east of it. He made himself a shelter there and sat in its shade to see what would happen to the city. Apparently Jonah is hoping God was second thoughts about his decision not to destroy Nineveh. He may even think his accusation of God being "too soft" might have persuaded the Lord to change his mind. He is sitting in the shade because as the ESV note says, "Jonah is hot, both emotionally and physically." **4:6 the Lord God appointed a plant, and it grew over Jonah to provide shade for his head to rescue him from his trouble. Jonah was greatly pleased with the plant.** We do not know what type of plant this is. A gourd plant is often suggested because of its large leaves. God intends to use the plant to cool his body off, but he also intends to use it to change Jonah's attitude. Jonah was greatly displeased (verse 1) when the Lord chose to spare and save Nineveh, but now (verse 6) he is very pleased that he has been spared and saved from the heat.

4:7 when dawn came the next day, God appointed a worm to attack the plant, and it withered. If we are paying attention we would note God does a bit of "appointing" in this book. He "appointed" a great fish to swallow Jonah (1:17), appointed a plant (4:6) to provide shade, and now he appoints a worm to kill the plant. Part of what we learn is that fish, plants, and worms all do what the Lord tells them to do. He is sovereign over all of creation. Whenever it seems this world is spinning out of control, it is good to remember that God is still on his throne, still working his purpose each and every day. And

the Lord is also in charge of the wealth. 4:8 As the sun was rising, God appointed a scorching east wind. (this is the wind off the desert) The sun beat down on Jonah's head so much that he almost fainted, and he wanted to die. He said, "it's better for me to die than to live." February in northern Minnesota makes it difficult for many of us to imagine how miserable it is to be too hot. Yet, when I think about It was 129.9 degrees in Death Valley, CA last August 17th, I think I will take 30 below any day. In verse 3 Jonah wanted to die because he was upset that Nineveh had been spared and now he wants to die because he is too hot. I think Jonah tends to be a little overly dramatic.

4:9 Then God asked Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about a plant?" again the Lord gently asked a question. **"Yes, it's right!" he replied. "I'm angry enough to die!"** and then God makes his point to Jonah and really all of us **4:10,11 And the Lord said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night. So may I not care about the great city of Nineveh, which has more than a hundred twenty thousand people who cannot distinguish between their right and their left, as well as many animals?"** Verse 10 notes that the plant Jonah is so upset about does not "belong" to Jonah, but to God, the creator. However, the contrast is clear. Jonah cares about plants, the Lord cares about people. And he even cares about animals. The point is probably that even Jonah should recognize the animals in Nineveh are obviously more important than the plant about which Jonah is having a fit.

I will take time to make a quick comment. I do not think there is anywhere in the bible that teaches animals have eternal souls. However, there are a number of passages that indicate God cares for and cares about, not just human being, but these other creatures he has made. **Jonah 4:11** is one of those verses. It is a good

thing for us to care for and care about an animal. A pet is a very good thing. And being cruel to animals is evil. It is interesting that William Wilberforce, the great evangelical leader in England during the early 1800's, not only was a zealous opponent of the slave trade, but also an advocate of laws preventing cruelty to animals. Now, the bible does not teach it is wrong to go hunting and use animals for food. Jesus helped his disciples catch fish and ate fish with them. But, if you are one of those folks, who does not go deer hunting, because you cannot pull the trigger when such a beautiful animal is staring at you, that's ok. And if you are a hunter who has a dozen antler mounts in your family room, that's ok too. So, let's move on before I say something that gets me in hot water with one side or the other.

The point is that the Lord cares about people. He has compassion. Jonah does not, but he should. Now, God's compassion is an interesting topic. As human beings we become emotionally attached to those things which meet our needs. Family members and friends may meet our need for companionship. A plant might meet our need for shade. God however, needs nothing. **Acts 17:25(nlt) Human hands can't serve God's needs-for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need.** The Lord is perfectly happy in himself. With that truth in mind people have come up with the idea of a benevolent God, meaning a God who does kind things for people even though he doesn't really care about them. Some have insisted God is apathetic, without emotions. Friends, though logic may tell us that is what the God should be like, the bible reveals he is not like that at all. Gen 6:6, e.g., says that when God looked down on evil of the earth "his heart was filled with pain."

Now, I believe all of God's emotions are different than ours. They are never tainted by sin. When he is anger, it is different, at least in some way,

from when I am angry. When the bible talks about God's love, his agape, it is purer than any love I have ever given or received. I suspect this means our language about God, how we speak about him, I always analogical. This means we always use analogies to explain who he is and what he is like. But that is ok, because the bible still reveals sufficient truth to us about God. It is not exhaustive truth; we will never know everything about God. But it is sufficient, through his word and spirit, he reveals everything to us we need to know, need to know as 2 Peter 1:3 says, for life and godliness.

One thing the bible makes clear is that God is both compassionate and righteous. We might say, he hates sin, but loves sinners. This is taught in the Old Testament. Remember that verse that Jonah misquoted, ***Exodus 34:6,7a The Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.*** Compassion and love, righteousness and justice. Both are part of who God is. That is evident when Jesus is on earth. Such great compassion. When Jesus sees people hurting, when they are lepers or prostitutes, he hurts. But he never compares his righteousness. He never joins sinners by sinning with them. He loves sinners but hates sin. Part of God's compassion for Nineveh involves the fact they ***Jonah 4:11b cannot distinguish between their right and their left.*** He is not referring to their intellectual capacity. The Ninevites were not necessarily dummies. What the phrase means is that they were simply blind and thus morally ignorant. Now, the fact God had threatened to destroy Nineveh means they are still guilty. They are responsible for the evil they have done, and there is no excuse for it. The bible indicates (Romans 1,2) that people are responsible for their own moral ignorance. Yet, God does not detach himself emotionally even from those he still punishes. There is a sadness, again, probably

different from our sadness, but a genuine sadness, even as he rightly executes judgement. Yet, he truly rejoices that justice has been done. The blindness and ignorance of the Ninevites is not an excuse for their sin. It is partly their fault they cannot tell their right hands from their left. But God still has compassion on them. And when they do repent, he is delighted to spare them.

I am not sure if this analogy will help you in understanding God's compassion, and if it does not make sense, do not worry and move on. In WW2, the American military often sought to train troops to hate the enemy by viewing them as "sub-human." German and Japanese were referred to as Krauts and Nips for a reason. Yet, all American soldiers swallowed that perspective. Some, especially those with deep Christian roots understood the enemy troops were very human, and very much liked them. They too had wives and children they adored. Germans and Japanese loved a picnic in the park or looking up at a clear night sky. Because of how evil and dangerous the Nazi ideology was, it was necessary to fight and even kill German soldiers and their allies. The American troops who did not hate the enemy celebrated victory just as much as anyone. Yet, there was a sadness about having to kill other human beings. And there was compassion. That is part of why the U.S. contributed in so many ways to rebuilding both Germany and Japan after the war. It is possible to fight and kill an enemy, and yet feel sadness over their fate and feel deep compassion for them as individuals. That, I believe is how the Lord feels about those whom he punishes. He does not regret his judgement because it is perfectly righteous. But there is sadness, because of the deep compassion has even for people who reject him. Ezekiel 33:11, the Lord does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked.

This is, of course, very different from Jonah's attitude. He has no compassion for the

Ninevites. They were enemies of Israel and he hated them. He almost certainly viewed them as “sub-human.” Their spiritual and moral ignorance evokes not even an ounce of sympathy from Jonah. He wanted God to “kill them all,” and when the Lord does not do that, Jonah is furious. Jonah’s concern is not that the Ninevites have offended God. Rather it is that he finds them offensive. Yet, as the book Jonah ends, it is clear Jonah’s attitude offends the Lord. God has chosen to spare the Ninevites. It remains to be seen whether Jonah will be restored as a prophet of God or whether he will continue in his prison of bitter hatred. And frankly, we do not know what happened to him after his Nineveh experience.

We do, however, know what our response should be. We are to be like the Lord, not like Jonah. We are to have compassion towards people. We are to hate the sin; we are to love the sinner. Now, many folks today seem to think that is impossible. They claim that you do not really behave and believe. Yet, anyone who is a parent knows that you can disapprove of the choice someone makes, but still love that person deeply. So, yes, we are to hate sin and evil, but have genuine compassion towards sinners, towards any human being. The bible gives 3 reasons why we should have that attitude.

#1 all human beings are made in the image of God. Gen. 1:6. One of the primary implications of this truth is that every person has value and is worthy of respect. Every person. I believe that is true for the unborn child in the womb and for women in the nursing home that cannot speak or feed herself. Every person. Human beings are uniquely God’s image bearers. That means “the lowest” human being is to be more valued than an animal. Now, I mentioned how kindness to animals is important, but there is a problem whenever we have more compassion for animals that are suffering than we do for people who are suffering. This includes those facing eternal

suffering because they are not believers in Jesus Christ.

#2 As God’s children, born and adopted into his family through Jesus Christ, we are to imitate his compassion. Because he loves sinners, we should love sinners as well. Jesus says we are to love even our enemies (Matthew 5:44). One of the fruits of the spirit should be evident in our lives is love. Yes, our love for fellow believers in Christ is a top priority. Yet, our love should also include the world that God loved so much that he sent his one only son. As God’s children, we should imitate his love for the world.

#3 because we have received grace, we should show grace to others. Because God has graciously forgiven our sins and not punish us as we deserve, we should be willing to do the same towards others. When he was in the belly of the fish Jonah experienced God’s grace. Inside the fish he seemed to get it. He seemed very grateful for how the Lord had rescued him. It only makes sense he would show compassion to others, including the Ninevites. He does not, but he certainly should have. Those of us who have received God’s grace should show grace to others, no matter who those others are. That includes ethnicity. To not have compassion towards people because their skin is a different color or because they speak a different language is disgusting as far as God is concerned. It also includes people who with different political views. The political divide in our nation seems deep right now. The have heard people from both sides speak of their opponents as if they were something less than human. Yet, when our political opponents are hurting, rather than rejoicing we should show compassion.

A good illustration of how that should work happened in 1974 when Chuck Colson went to prison for obstruction of justice in the Watergate scandal. Colson had become a believer in Jesus a year earlier. He was part of a bible study that included Sen. Harold Hughes, a fairly liberal

democrat from IA, and congressman Al Quie, a fairly conservative republican from Minnesota. Quie later became governor of our fair state, from 1979-83, after defeating governed Rudy Perpich in the 1978 election. Incidentally, he is now 97 years old and I believe lives in a health care facility in the Twin Cities. When Colson 1st went to jail, Hughes and Quie came to visit him, and offered to take Colson's place in prison. They had discovered an obscure law that would allow one of them to do that. Colson refused, but it was a reminder of the deep compassion these political opponents had for each other because of their faith in Jesus.

"but P.D. I am sorry, I just do not have that type of compassion, especially for people who do not share my beliefs, and chose behavior is...disturbing. Well, I do not either. By God's grace I want to have that type of compassion, maybe it's a good model for you. 1st, I keep praying that the Lord will soften my heart. Then I repeat remind myself of those 3 points. – every human being is made in God's image, much grace, I should show grace to others. And then I frequently find myself of the most important truth of all, the Lord is a gracious and compassionate God. he sees the hardness of my heart, but loves me anyway. He knows my frequent selfish thoughts, my occasional harsh words, and my once in a while not so ice deeds. And yet, through Jesus he forgives me, freely and fully. The reality is that I am sometimes like Jonah, but the good news is that God is always like God. it is a comfort and joy to know that my salvation does not depend on my degree of compassion, but on the Lord's great compassion for me. I hope that confidence as well. If not, we should chat. If you have confidence join in celebrating God's compassion as we sing...