



Sermon Growth Guide

May 12, 2024

“Not Them”



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Jonah's Errand - Not Them

Jonah 4:1-4

Key Verse: Jonah 4:4

“But the Lord replied, ‘Is it right for you to be angry?’”

Big Idea: God wants to change us from the inside out.

Foundations

This week we hear Jonah's reaction to God's surprising salvation of the Ninevites. Jonah thinks back to his flight from God at the very beginning of the story (Jonah 1:3). Despite the fact that Jonah obeyed the voice of the Lord this time around, (Jonah 3:3), his heart hasn't really changed. Jonah reveals the real reason for his flight: he didn't want the Ninevites to be saved.

Jonah knows God well. Jonah knows that God is “...a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” (Jonah 4:2b) But this is exactly what Jonah doesn't like. He wants the Ninevites to be punished.

In the Hebrew, it says that what God did “was exceedingly evil to Jonah.” Jonah's attitude is tragically reminiscent of the words of James, the brother of Jesus: “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder!” (James 2:19) God wants us to have more than just a mental knowledge of who He is. God desires our hearts. He wants us to reflect his own character of love, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness. God wants us to love our enemies and forgive others, because that's what God himself is like. (Matthew 5:43-48, Ephesians 4:32)

God wants Jonah to change. By asking, “Is it right for you to be angry?” God invites Jonah to reflect on his own character and motivations. God wants to change Jonah from the inside out.

Understanding God's Word

Together, read Jonah 4:1-4.

From what you know of Scripture, how would you describe the character of God?

Host a discussion about God's character. What aspects of God's character are offensive to you? What aspects of God's character are offensive to the culture around us?

Applying God's Word

Despite his struggles, Jonah does something good in this passage. Jonah prays honestly to God about his frustrations and feelings. It is through his prayers that God begins to invite Jonah to change.

What is your response when you are angry with God? Do you wrestle with God in prayer? Do you take time in prayer to listen for God's response to you?

Witnessing God's Word

We are not very different from Jonah. It is extremely difficult to love our enemies and to forgive those who have hurt us. Take some time to pray together about who God might be wanting you to love or forgive this week. Ask the Holy Spirit to help change your heart concerning this person or group of people.

How far does grace go? How deep does it run? I remember being in a Bible Study with Young Life when I was a new Christian teenager and the leader asked, "Are you ready to see Adolf Hitler in heaven?" I said, "No." He explained, we don't have any evidence to suggest this happened, but if he accepted Christ even with his dying breath, you will see him there. The point was that the power of the blood of Christ on the cross is enough to pay the debt for any sinner, any sinner!

I once met a man who spent his young years as an assassin for Yasser Arafat, now he's a believer and evangelist for Christ. I know a man who led a communist Army to overthrow the government of Ethiopia, now he's a humble follower of Jesus. I sat with a young man just over a month ago who murdered two people and shot a police officer. He's serving multiple life sentences, but now he knows Jesus and hopes to serve Him inside the corrections system for the rest of his life. They'll all be in heaven with us. The grace of Christ is enough to forgive any sinner. That's good news, for them and for us. If the cross wasn't powerful enough to save the worst of sinners, where would I be? If Christ's blood avails for the most egregious of sinners, His blood avails for me.

Happy Mother's Day by the way. Glad you're here! This is one of those years when the team asked, "Are you sure that's the right message for Mother's Day?" Probably not, but that's not exactly how we do our planning. Nonetheless, grace is a message that always fits. I find that while these great stories of forgiveness and grace are inspiring, we often need grace more in our closest relationships. We are grateful for mothers and grateful to celebrate the birth of new faith and new membership in our confirmation students again this year. We don't meet Jonah's mother. That would be interesting, wouldn't it? But we learn a lot about Jonah in these four short verses. Jonah is looking for some limits to God's grace. When it comes to Israel's greatest enemies, Jonah says, "Please Lord, Not Them."

To catch us up, Jonah was a Galilean prophet who served King Jeroboam II supporting his efforts to restore the borders of Israel through military might in the 8th century BC. He was proud of his country. God told him to go to Nineveh, an Assyrian city, and preach against them. The Assyrians were sworn enemies of Israel, and a violent, murderous, terroristic people. Jonah ran the other direction and got caught up in a storm sent by God. When the sailors asked who he was, Jonah replied first, "I'm a Hebrew." His nationality was most important. He was thrown overboard, swallowed by a whale where he learned again to pray, then spit up on a beach where God said, "Wouldn't you like to go to Nineveh?" Jonah said, "Yes. Yes, I think I would." So, he went and preached in Nineveh, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown." God's judgment. But the Ninevites repented. They turned around. They turned toward God and asked for mercy, and God gave it. Jonah was so pleased with this, he ran up and down the streets of Nineveh kissing his new brothers and sisters on the lips, welcoming them into God's family, and he ran home singing and shouting and praising God! No.

"But to Jonah this seemed very wrong, and he became angry." (Jonah 4:1) Grace is often scandalous. It is a stumbling block for us. We are either insulted by the suggestion that we need it, or incensed to see others get it who don't deserve it. To Jonah, this seemed wrong. First of all, he may have been upset because the prophecy didn't come true. God didn't destroy Nineveh on the fortieth day, and this, according to Deuteronomy 18, calls Jonah's status as a prophet into question. What he prophesied did not come to pass. But the deeper anger, what seemed very, very wrong to Jonah, was the scandal of grace. How could God, who is righteous and just, who hates evil and murder, how could God extend mercy to these terrorists of Nineveh? Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:43-44) Jonah wasn't ready for that yet. Are we?

Well, now we get the insider's view to Jonah's motivations. Here is the dialogue Jonah has been having with God all along, since he first heard he was supposed to go to Nineveh: "He prayed to the Lord, 'Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing 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.'" (Jonah 4:2) I knew it! I knew you were going to be compassionate and forgiving. Doggone it! Of course, these are the qualities of God we celebrate, that God is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love. The Psalms are riddled with these phrases. Daily prayers and liturgies repeat these truths over and over. We love that God is forgiving, to us. But them? Not them. Not them.

We have to ask Jonah the hard questions here, as we sometimes have to ask ourselves. What is it, Jonah, that keeps you from welcoming these people into your fold, into the family? Is it racism? We all have a tendency to feel most at home with people who look the most like us. It's easy to extend grace when you look like me, talk like me, think like me. The greater challenge of Jesus is not to extend love to those who share our image; the challenge is to see God's image in faces that do not share your personal image. Is it nationalism? A healthy gratitude for your country and people is a good thing, but when it supersedes your care for the person in front of you it may be turning into an idol. These two nations have a horrible history of violence and warfare. The destruction of Nineveh meant the flourishing of Israel, but if God shows mercy that all turns around. Is that what kept Jonah from celebrating grace? Jonah went to put a finger in the chest of his enemy, but God sent Jonah to extend the scandalous embrace of grace. Jonah is like the angry older brother in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son. God is the loving Father extending the arms of mercy. To Jonah it seems very wrong.

"Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live." (Jonah 4:3) How do you know you have developed an idol, a false god, in your life? We all have a tendency to worship idols. Don't believe me? How would you do if you woke up tomorrow and all your money was gone, or even just cut in half? What if through no fault of your own your business collapsed, or you lost your position of leadership by the fault of another, no fault of your own, and your reputation was destroyed? What if your wife left you and you found out she had been cheating on you for years? What if you suddenly had a disfiguring accident or surgery on your face and you never looked the same? These are not from my imagination. I have had friends go through each of these trials. If that thing—your money, your position, your business, your wife and family, your good looks—if that thing has settled in too close to your heart, then you will utterly collapse to lose it. You will be shattered on the floor, possibly never to rise again. But if Christ is the center of your life... This is the secret of the Christian life, see? You can lose everything and still have it all. Christ is your all.

How do you know if you've developed an idol? Look at Jonah. I'd rather die. I would rather die than see Ninevites receive mercy. Really? Yes. Why? Because something has needled its way so close to his heart, so near the very center, that it is bigger and more important to him than anything, than God Himself, than the Word of God that commanded him to preach to the Assyrians. What is it? The hard questions. Whatever it is, when Jonah perceives that he has lost it, he loses his will to live. He collapses. It is better for me to die. I don't even want to live anymore. That's an idol. Look at this from Isaiah: "With whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared? Some pour out gold from their bags and weigh out silver on the scales; they hire a goldsmith to make it into a god, and they bow down and worship it. They lift it to their shoulders and carry it; they set it up in its

place, and there it stands. From that spot it cannot move. Even though someone cries out to it, it cannot answer; it cannot save them from their troubles. Remember this, keep it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me." (Isaiah 46:5-9) It is God's gift to us to shatter our idols. It sets us free.

This is part of what Jesus is doing with this messy, broken, inefficient project called church. Jesus is unleashing a people as free men and women, freed from tying our identity to false gods. We have a job, have money, have a race, are citizens of our nation, but none of these things are at the core. If we were to lose them, we would lose nothing because we have Jesus as the core. The center holds. There is no desperate collapse, but the eternal and divine peace of resting in God's unrelenting grace. Jesus is unleashing this people across the face of the earth, a people so forgiven, they can forgive, so loved they can love, so comforted they can extend comfort, so full of peace they can share peace. This is the joy of the people of God, and it changes the world. Are we living into that? Shatter the idols. Walk free.

Now finally, God takes up the role of therapist. He asks Jonah the needed question. "But the Lord replied, 'Is it right for you to be angry?'" (Jonah 4:4) Isn't God good? He could have dropped Isaiah 46 on Jonah's head like a ton of bricks! "I am the Lord, and there is no other!" Instead, God asks a question. A question causes us to look inside, to examine our own motivations and reasoning. We need good questions to help us rethink what we thought we knew, reassess the position we have taken, reconsider what God may be doing when the situation has made us so angry, so depressed, so clouded. Think again, Jonah. Is it right for you to be angry? Jonah has one more chance to look at his priorities, his idolatries, whatever it is that competes today with God's purposes.

Are you right to be angry, Jonah? We have given him a hard time, but we are not far from him, are we? Also Jonah is wrestling with a real question here. He has a true theological conundrum. Jonah sees a contradiction between the justice of God and the love of God. A just God hates evil. A God who executes justice does not extend mercy and forgiveness to murderous, violent, terrorists. Where is the rightness in that? Has God's love washed out God's concern for what is right and wrong, what is just and true? No. Wrongs demand to be put right; injustice must be addressed. We are not called to be doormats. It serves no one to allow a bully to step on your nose again and again. But there is mercy. There is grace.

How can God be like this? How, ultimately, can God be both just and loving? Because Jesus, His Son, brought love and justice together on the cross. He paid the penalty for all that is unjust, violent, perverse and harmful in this world. Jesus said, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:39-40) The cross of Christ is where the demands of justice are paid, and forgiveness becomes a possibility. What is closest to your heart? Where are you with Jesus?