

Sermon Response Guide: November 12, 2023
Jonah 4: Learning to Love Your Enemies Pastor Phil Rushton

Sermon Overview:

At the beginning of our text today, we discover that Jonah is holding on tightly to his anger. With clenched fists, he refuses to accept God's compassion over the repentant Ninevites. Jonah 4:1 says Jonah was "greatly displeased and became angry." He is so angry that he has lost his will to live. In Jonah 4:3 he says, "Now, O Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live."

Biblical Scholar Douglas Stuart writes, "Jonah had lost his purpose for living, which was so wrapped up in the expectation of the defeat of his nation's enemies." The question this text poses to us is this. Are we holding onto desires and goals that are contrary to God's desires? Are there things we are holding on to that are impeding our ability to surrender to God's will?

A great way to detect unhealthy attachments in our life is to pay attention to strong expressions of emotion. It is normal to be disappointed when we lose something valuable, or when things don't go our way. However, when loss evokes a reaction like Jonah's, it may be a sign that we have a disordered attachment. It may be a sign that the thing we are holding on to has replaced God as our source of joy, purpose and hope.

God, in his grace, is still working on Jonah. He wants to free Jonah from his anger and bitterness. He wants Jonah to experience the freedom that comes when he surrenders to God's purpose.

What we discover, in the book of Jonah, is that this process of surrendering to God isn't a one time thing. Jonah had a partial conversion in chapter 2. We have some initial hope that Jonah is a changed man; however, chapter 4 reminds us that there is more work to be done.

I appreciate this aspect of the book of Jonah. It gives us a more accurate and authentic picture of the spiritual journey. Sometimes I think we have false expectations that once we've had a conversion experience we should be good to go. Everything will be rosy, there will be no more problems, and we will automatically desire to do what God asks. The discipleship journey, however, is often not linear. Sometimes, like Jonah, it is more like a spiral. We often find ourselves circling back around to issues we thought we had dealt with, only to discover that God has deeper work for us to attend to.

Jonah's conversation with God at the end of the text gives us some practical guidance for how we can learn to love our enemies.

First, this text gives us a window into God's heart for the people we are struggling to love. Jonah 4 reminds us that the same grace we celebrate in our own life is also meant for those we love. In Jonah 4:2 he says, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity." This is a reference back to God's compassion on the Israelite people in Exodus 32 after they abandon God and make the Golden Calf. Jonah, however, had limited this aspect of God to his own people. He is the beneficiary of God's grace. What's surprising to him in this story, is that God is extending this grace to his enemies.

The chapter ends with God asking the question "Should I not be concerned or have compassion for the Ninevites?" Biblical Scholar Rosemary Nixon points out that this word literally means "to have tears in one eyes." The book of Jonah ends with this image of God being moved with tears for the Ninevites. Perhaps we ought to picture God weeping with compassion for those we are struggling to love.

Second, God challenges Jonah to see the humanity of his enemies. "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people." God is pointing out the irony in Jonah's life. Jonah is weeping over his misfortune of having a plant wither, while ignoring the plight of 120,000 people. God is trying to get Jonah's attention. He is trying to humanize his enemies.

Third, God invites Jonah to recognize the vulnerability of the Ninevites. Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people, "who cannot tell their right from their left hand." This is an idiom that represents spiritual blindness. I think the NLT gets this right by translating this phrase, a people living in spiritual darkness." God reminds Jonah that the people are blind to their sin and their evil. Now this does not excuse the evil of the Ninevites. We need to hold in tension the fact that God is troubled by evil and injustice. However, God invites us to have a more compassionate understanding of the reason behind people's dysfunctional behavior.

The book ends without being resolved. This is an intentional literary device. It invites us to reflect on how we might finish the story. It is up to us to determine what chapter five will look like. Will we hold on to our anger or will we let go and experience the freedom that comes when open ourselves up to God's mercy and grace.

And Jonah stalked
to his shaded seat
and waited for God
to come around
to his way of thinking.
And God is still waiting
for a host of Jonahs
in their comfortable houses
to come around
to his way of loving.
— THOMAS JOHN CARLISLE

Discussion:

1. What stood out to you in the text / sermon today?
2. How do you discern when an attachment in your life has become disordered? How do you know when something has become more important to you than God?
3. Do you have a Nineveh - a person or a group that you are struggling to forgive and have compassion toward?
4. Based on what we read in Jonah 4, how can we cultivate compassion for our enemies?