

The only way we will ever love people appropriately is to love God preeminently. The Great Commandment is to love God with all of your being and love your neighbor as yourself. Who is my neighbor? Anyone who is not me. Jonah was a living breathing illustration of a common heart condition we are all susceptible to – hardening of the categories.

Imagine you go to lunch and your friend starts choking on some food. You try the Heimlich but nothing seems to be working. You see a fire station across the street so you run over there and start screaming, “Come quickly my friend is dying.” When you get to the fire station you find all the fire-fighters huddled in front of a TV watching the Cowboy game munching on some snacks with their feet propped up. To your surprise, they don’t move a muscle. You scream again. One of them holds up a hand and says, “Relax, there are only two minutes left in the game and then we’ll send someone over.” Sound a little far-fetched?

Sometimes I wonder if God looks down at us and views us like those imaginary fire-fighters. By His grace He saved us from certain death and called into service in this cosmic battle for the souls of men. We possess the life-saving words of eternal life but we are too often either ignorant of our calling or worse, we have found better things to do with our lives. God will do whatever it takes to save His children. That’s the message of Jonah.

The book of Jonah is not about a whale. It’s not even about a wailing prophet. This book is about God. God is a missionary God but the people of God are frequently a selfish people. Certainly that was true of Israel, which was intended to be a nation of priests, a missionary nation, acting to bring people to God by His grace. But instead of being a priestly people they became a prideful people who took credit for God's grace. They didn't proclaim God’s grace, they possessed it; they didn’t share it, they kept it for themselves as if it was theirs alone and they deserved it. So God took the very best He had--Jonah--and sent him to Nineveh.

I. Jonah was called by God... vv. 1-2. Jonah was a faithful prophet. We don’t know a lot about him except that he was a prophet from the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the eighth century B.C. It was a time of great crisis in Israel when Kings did “what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” But Jonah followed Elijah and Elisha as a faithful ambassador for the LORD. **2 Kings 14:23-25** says, “In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, *and reigned* forty-one years. ²⁴ He did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin. ²⁵ He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher.”

Jonah predicted prosperity and his words came true. Can you imagine if you could predict what the economy was going to do? You would be invited to every board room on Wall St. So Jonah was a successful prophet. But past success is never a substitute for present obedience. Those who are faithful in small things are given greater responsibility.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah... God burst into Jonah's life in a unique way. There are only 16 men in all history who received the "word of the Lord" the way Jonah did.

"The prophets often described the sharpness of such an encounter: it was a sword in their spirits, a burden on their shoulders, a hammer breaking their rocky hearts, a fire raging within them. It was bitter to taste. It came. It could not be halted, and it forced itself on them unbidden. It gripped their minds and touched their consciences. It impelled their emotions. They could not escape the certain assurance that the voice of God was sounding in their hearts and must now sound to others through their lips." (Sinclair Ferguson) But Jonah was different. Jonah ran away.

II. Jonah disobeyed God's command. His response is summed up in one word, "but." When God gives a command you don't want "but" to be the next word. God said "Go," Jonah said, "No."

Jonah had a good reason to disobey God. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. 550 miles from Samaria. Jonah was a Hebrew speaking prophet who had no track record in Assyria. Picture a Mexican immigrant walking into the Capitol building with a message to congress. Who's going to listen to him? Furthermore Nineveh was the San Francisco or Las Vegas of the middle East. It was famous for being a wicked place. The Assyrians flaunted their wickedness. Even their kings had evil sounding names like Ashurbanipal and Tiglath Pileser. These guys were not only powerful rulers who subdued their neighbors but when they defeated an enemy they made a sport of it. They decapitated their victims and even flayed their bodies and attached the skins to the wall of the city. Here are some statements archaeologists have discovered among the records from the Assyrian kings:

"I slaughtered them and with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool."

"The heads of their warriors I cut off and formed into a pillar near the city."

"I killed him and spread his skin upon the wall of the city."

"I pierced his chin with my hand dagger and put a rope through his jaw."

Jonah has good reason not to go to Nineveh. It's hard for us to think that people who reject and attack our way of life could be objects of God's grace. After all, they're our enemies, so they must be God's enemies too. "We know we've made God in our own image when God hates all the same people we do." Anne Lamott

In just a couple of weeks, 3 million Muslim pilgrims from 160 countries in the world will converge on Mecca and Medina for the annual Hajj. All able-bodied Muslims are required to go to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. I read an article recently that expressed concern that because of the density of the pilgrims who will be shoulder to shoulder as they pray, they will create the perfect transmission atmosphere for the H1N1 virus. In other words thousands, maybe even millions of Muslims could get sick and die. Think about that, thousands maybe even

millions of people like the man who killed the soldiers at Ft. Hood, like Osama Bin Laden, like Ahmadinajad and other haters of America could get sick and die. How do you feel about that? If you think, “They deserve a good case of Swine Flu,” you understand Jonah’s dilemma.

III. Jonah paid the price for his disobedience..vv. 3-16. There are a number of consequences associated with a carelessness toward God’s call.

a. When we reject God’s call we are susceptible to being misguided by circumstances. Jonah went to Joppa and found what he wanted. “What a coincidence. A ship headed to Tarshish. You know, Tarshish is a place that needs to know about God. It must be God’s will. Why else would there be a ship at just the right time going to just the right place?” Have you ever noticed that when you want to run from God, there is always a ship going right where you want to go right when you want to go there. Never be guided by circumstances when you are refusing to be guided by God’s word. So Jonah books a ticket to Tarshish was 2,000 miles away.

b. When we reject God’s call we develop a calloused conscience...vv. 4-5. Jonah sleeps in the boat during a raging storm. One of the unintended consequences of saying “no” to God is a callousness toward others. When we sense God is telling us to do something and we ignore Him then it gets easier to ignore Him the next time.

c. When we reject God’s call we often experience shame in the presence of unbelievers...v. 6. The captain of the ship says what God said, “Arise, go...” This is the definition of a true “wake up call” - when unbelievers have a higher standard than you have. They feared the LORD...v. 10; they rowed desperately to save Jonah...v. 13; they called upon the LORD...v. 14; they worshiped the LORD...v. 16. God is at work in the lives of these sailors even through Jonah’s disobedience.

d. When we reject God’s call we lose confidence before God...v. 12. What a curious response. Not, “I will repent,” but “Throw me overboard.” He would rather die than change his heart. Jonah was a castaway not just physically but spiritually. He may have felt God had no more use for him.

Like Jonah, we face many tempting alternatives to doing what God has called us to do. Each and every day we wake up and enter a fierce competition between our will and God’s will; our old man and our new man; the flesh versus the Spirit. When we pursue our own plans, desires, ambitions, without respect for God’s will, we will experience the unwanted grace of God. Jonah had the opportunity to see 600,000 people transformed by the Gospel. But Jonah’s heart was out of sync with God’s heart. He became the recipient of God’s unwanted grace. Sometimes God’s grace is as unwelcomed as it is undeserved. Unwanted grace conform our heart to God’s heart.

“How could grace be unwanted? I want all the grace I can get.” Let me put it to you this way: If you had the choice to stand in a line that said, “God’s grace - to live a highly successful life, to have the career I want, to be healthy and happy” or stand in one that said, “God’s grace – to die

from cancer with dignity, to lose a job and not lose heart, to lose a loved one and not lose my mind,” which one would you stand in. I know which one I would stand in. Yet God’s grace comes to us as He chooses for His purposes, for His glory and for our good. God’s unwanted grace comes into our lives to transform theory into trust, to turn our heart back to God.

Loving God preeminently is the first step to loving all others appropriately. God’s people should share God’s passion. The greatest distance Jonah had to travel was not the distance between Samaria and Nineveh. Not even the distance from Samaria to Tarshish. It was the distance between his hardened heart and his transformed heart. Jonah needed God’s grace as much as the Ninevites. No one is qualified to receive the grace of God. Grace always comes to the unworthy. Grace is never the fruit of our good behavior. It is always undeserved favor. We deserve nothing, except maybe hell.

Dan Gold operating on Muslim mullah...took Jesus video to all the Mosques in his district.

God is calling us like He called Jonah. God to Nineveh. It’s right next door.

