

The Education of a Prophet: Jonah

by John Piper

God's love and mercy are not limited to any race or nation, and we, his people, ought to show mercy and forgiveness to all people.

Duration: 16:59

Scripture: Jonah 4:6-7, Jonah 4:9, Micah 6:8, Matthew 7:23, Luke 18:13, 1 Peter 2:23

Topics: "Gods Mercy", "Racial Justice"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Jonah and how God teaches him a lesson about mercy. God appoints a fish, a plant, a worm, and a hot wind to teach Jonah about mercy and justice. The preacher emphasizes that God's mercy knows no boundaries and that we, as God's people, should also show mercy and do justice. The preacher also shares personal experiences of witnessing racism in a Baptist church and highlights the contradiction between racism and the teachings of Jesus.

Transcript

I remember a Wednesday night when I was just a boy in Greenville, South Carolina. My mother came home from a Wednesday night business meeting at church with... I can't remember whether she was crying or not, but there was this mixture of anger and grief on her face. I can't remember quite how old I was either, or why I wasn't there, but I must have been that young.

She had been the only person who had stood up to oppose a motion that black people would not be permitted to come to our church, and the motion passed easily anyway. A few years later, my sister got married in that church, and we invited a black family to come to the wedding, who had been long-time friends, and when they entered the church they were told to go in the balcony, which was just as bare as that balcony is right there. My mother, with great indignation, insisted that they sit with the other guests down below.

A few years later, I can't remember how many, I was a teenager this time, I can remember we had a party over to our house of young couples in the church, and I can remember how one of the young men bragged about being a member of the Ku Klux Klan and belittled the black race. Now that was a large city Baptist church, and it was shot through with racism. And by racism I mean disrespectful, belittling, and sometimes violent attitudes towards people of another race.

And that's a phenomenon that is utterly contradictory to the spirit and the commands of our Lord Jesus. He said, for example, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. He extolled a Samaritan who took the time to help a needy Jew.

He praised and justified a man who said, God be merciful to me, a sinner. When he was reviled, Peter said, he did not revile in return. When he was threatened or when he suffered, he did not threaten but handed over to him who judges justly.

I shudder to think how many people in the Bible belt are going to hear Jesus say on the judgment day, I never knew you, depart from me, you church members who do evil. Today, there are in the northern woods of Alabama covered by kudzu vines, military camps of the Ku Klux Klan secretly training and equipping with automatic weapons. They're white members for the anticipated race war.

The invisible empire knights of the KKK threaten and abuse blacks this day throughout the South. And of course, it's not restricted to the South. And this is just one ugly manifestation of the resurgent racism and hyper nationalism in our land today.

And they are not far away. Neither this piece nor its twin sister, the Nazism, nor its first cousin, the British Israelite teaching are far away. People who have come to this church service have left unsigned material for me to read, arguing that the Caucasian race is supreme and superior because we are the ten tribes of the Israelites who were lost and then moved west.

Two comments about that, by the way. One, I regard it as historical nonsense. There is no way to substantiate such a thing.

But much more important than the historical foolishness of it is the fact that whether white or yellow or black or red or brown are supreme is irrelevant to how to treat people. Suppose that you're a German and you have a superior theoretical intelligence. Suppose that you're a Japanese and you have a superior marketing skill.

Suppose that you're an American and you have a superior technological prowess. It doesn't matter. It is irrelevant if you belong to Jesus and follow him.

Suppose you are first. The first shall be last. Suppose you are mature and advanced.

Unless you turn and become like a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Suppose you are great. If you would be great, you must become the servant of everybody.

It doesn't matter who is supreme. If you love Jesus, race and nationality cannot determine how you treat people. If you love Jesus, there will be a universal goodwill towards people of all nations and all races.

That's what Jesus meant when he said, bless those who curse you. You cannot bless somebody if you have ill will towards them. That's the meaning of blessing, namely wishing them well rather than ill.

So if you're a follower of Jesus, you must desire the good of everyone, no matter the color or the nationality. Now that's the point of the book of Jonah. Whether you've ever read it in that light or not.

Let's look at it. Turn to Jonah and we'll walk through this tremendous gospel prophet from first to last and see how God educates this racist about his will. Not long after Elijah and Elisha were off the scene, another prophet arose.

He's mentioned in second Kings, 14, 25, Jonah, son of Amittai, citizen of Gath, Hefer near Nazareth. And the word of the Lord came to Jonah. First to arise, go to Nineveh, that great city and cry against it for their wickedness has come up against me.

But Jonah does not want to go. Why is it because Nineveh is the chief city of the Assyrian Empire, the enemies, the Gentiles, the foreigners. Like John Sailhammer said to the king's friends, the answer is in the back of the book.

We'll find out in a minute, whatever the reason Jonah doesn't want to go. And he heads in the opposite direction. Tarsius is on the other side of the Mediterranean, but he gets in the boat.

The Lord hurls against the sea in the boat, a great wind. And there in dire straits, the sailors find out that Jonah is fleeing from God and they are terrified. So Jonah says to them in verse 12, take me up and throw me into the sea and then the sea will quiet down for you.

For I know that it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you. So fear and trembling, they pray for forgiveness and toss him overboard. God appoints a great fish to swallow up Jonah.

Then Jonah cries out to the Lord and the fish spits him out on dry land. And the word of the Lord comes to Jonah a second time. Chapter three, verse two.

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, arise and go to Nineveh, that great city and proclaim to it the message that I tell you. So Jonah goes, he walks into this city and he starts saying yet 40 days and Nineveh will be overthrown. He pronounces judgment on the city for its wickedness.

And would you believe it? The Ninevites believe God. They and their king repent, turn from their evil ways, put on sackcloth and ashes, proclaim a fast and are converted. When God saw what they did.

How they turn from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them, and he did not do this. And here comes the key to the book. Chapter four, verse one.

It displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry and he prayed to the Lord and said, I pray thee, Lord. Is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That's why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that thou art a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and repentant of evil. Isn't that crazy? He's a racist.

He's a nationalist. He did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew God would show mercy on these rest. He did not want their repentance.

He wanted their doom. And quite to the contrary of the spirit of Jesus, he did not have goodwill towards his enemies. He was not about to bless those who had cursed him.

He was a hard liner. God was soft. And he went outside the city to sulk.

Does that remind you of anybody in the New Testament? I think Jonah in the New Testament is the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. Remember that parable? It's the same point as Jonah. Exactly.

The elder brother takes off with God's money, his father's money, squanders it in riotous living, comes to himself and says, well, my last chance is God or my father comes home. He represents the scribes of the tax collectors and sinners in Jesus' day. Now, the Pharisee is the elder brother.

All the time this young son has been away, the Pharisee, the elder brother, has been saying how superior he is to this black, red, yellow, brown sheep in the family. And here comes the black sheep home. And what does this father do? Just like to the Ninevites, he runs out, kisses him, puts a ring on his finger, a robe on his back, kills the best calf, throws a big party.

He's alive. And what does the elder brother do? He hears about it and he gets mad. He won't go in.

Just like Jonah sits outside the city sulking, the elder brother sits outside on the porch sulking. I've been here putting in my time and you don't throw me a party. And here comes this rascal, no good brother home.

And what do you do? Just forgive him. Just like that. I don't like that kind of God.

Jonah doesn't like that kind of God. Why? Because he wrecks their supremacy. See, he calls their superiority into question.

By the way, I was reading last night and thought of another one. Read Matthew 20 in the first 12 verses or so and you'll see another Jonah. But I don't have time to tell you about that one.

What would make a Baptist Klansman angrier than to have to offer God's mercy to a black community? What would make a Nazi angrier than to have to go into a Jewish ghetto and preach mercy and forgiveness? What would make a nationalistic American angry than to have to be the bearers of forgiveness to Tehran or Moscow? The lesson that God is trying to teach Jonah and us through him is that God loves to show mercy. And that we, his people, ought to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God. And in the little word mercy is implied no boundaries.

No race and no ethnic and no national barriers can stand in the way of mercy or disqualify a person from our love. Now Jonah hadn't yet learned the lesson. You'd think he had.

He hadn't learned the lesson. So let's follow God's education on through chapter 4. God continues his education in verse 6. Formerly he appointed a fish to swallow him up. Now he appoints a plant to grow up mercifully, to bring shade to this rascal Jonah.

He shades him. God's a very patient teacher, but a very wise teacher. Next he appoints a worm.

First a fish, then a plant, now a worm to kill the plant. Then when the plant is shriveled up and there's no more shade, he brings a hot wind and sun and he makes Jonah miserable. In verse 8. Now Jonah's response is twofold.

He's angry. Angry that his shade is gone. In verse 9. And evidently he makes out to God like he pities this plant.

So God's got him exactly where he wants him now. And God says to Jonah, you pity the plant? You didn't labor over that plant? You didn't make it grow? It came up in one single night and is gone and you pity that plant? Jonah, I labored over this city minimally. I made this city grow.

And it's not been one night in the making, it's been decades. And ought not I pity this city with its 120,000 people and much cattle? Shouldn't I be angry that this city doesn't give me glory? If you can be angry that that plant doesn't give you shade, God's a good teacher. Who do you think made the food for this cattle? Who do you think gave the wisdom to the little calves so they knew how to suckle their mommy from the

day they were born and didn't die out? It was I, the Lord.

I don't want these cattle to be wiped out. I made these cattle not for fire and brimstone. I made them to be enjoyed by a redeemed people.

I have created good things for those who believe and know the truth. Forsake your racism, Jonah. Forsake your nationalism and follow me.

Let me have your life. Be merciful as your Father in heaven is merciful. God went a long way to educate the prophet Jonah to rejoice when he shows mercy, not to grumble or sulk when he shows mercy.

God was merciful to Jonah and saved his life when he should have drowned. Why? So that he could be God's emissary of mercy. When God swallowed up Jonah by the big fish, he made Jonah into a big fish to go to Nineveh to show mercy.

That's always God's pattern. Show mercy that we might show mercy. And ultimately he dies for us that we might live for others.

That's the final thing. All others. God's mercy is not limited to any race or any nation.

It reached even to us in our wickedness and misery. It saved us from the depths of sin like a big fish. And it sent us off to Nineveh, Minneapolis, St. Paul.

There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea. God forbid that I should let that mercy stop, oh Lord, with me. And now may the God of mercy and grace fill us with that same mercy to show it to everyone we meet this week, no matter what the color or the ethnic origin.

In Jesus name. Amen.

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