

The Education of a Prophet

by John Piper

John Piper's sermon emphasizes the importance of God's mercy and the call for Christians to transcend racial and national barriers in their love for others.

Topics: "Racial Reconciliation", "Gods Mercy"

Description

John Piper preaches on the story of Jonah, highlighting the prophet's struggle with racism and nationalism, as he initially refuses to go to Nineveh, a city of his enemies, because he knows God's mercy would be extended to them. This mirrors the lesson of the prodigal son's elder brother who resents the father's mercy towards his wayward sibling. Through Jonah's journey, God teaches the importance of showing mercy and love to all people, regardless of race or nationality, emphasizing the need to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Transcript

May 3, 1981

Jonah

THE EDUCATION OF A PROPHET: JONAH I can remember one Wednesday night when I was a little boy in Greenville, South Carolina, my mother came home after a church business meeting with anger and grief on her face. Daddy was out of town. And mother had been the only person at the meeting to stand up and oppose a motion that no black people be allowed to attend our church. It passed easily anyway. A few years later when my sister was getting married in our church we invited a black family who were long-time friends. When they came in the front door of the church someone instructed them they should sit in the balcony, but my mother insisted they sit with the other guests on the main floor. Sometime later there was a party at our house for young church couples and I recall how one of the men bragged about his membership in the Ku Klux Klan and belittled the black race. That was a large, city, middle class, Baptist Church, shot through with racism. By racism I mean a disrespectful, belittling and sometimes violent attitude toward people of another race.

It is a phenomenon utterly contrary to the spirit of Jesus Christ our Lord, who said, "Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you and bless those who curse you and pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27, 28). He extolled a Samaritan who stopped to help a needy Jew (Luke 10:29-37). He commended the poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3) and justified a man who cried out, "God be merciful to me a

sinner" (Luke 18:13). "When he was reviled he did not revile in return; when he suffered he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). I shudder to think how many churchgoers in the Bible Belt are going to hear Jesus say at the judgment day, "I never knew you; depart from me you evildoers" (Matt. 7:23).

Today in the woods of northern Alabama covered with kudzu vine, Ku Klux Klan military camps secretly train and equip their members for the "race war" they anticipate. The Invisible Empire, Knights of the KKK threaten and abuse blacks and Jews throughout the South. And this is just one ugly manifestation of the resurgent racism and hyper-nationalism of our country. Neither it nor its Nazi twin nor its British-Israelite cousin are far from us. People who have attended our services have sent me unsigned material about the supremacy of the caucasian race because we are supposedly the 10 lost tribes of Israel. Two comments: First, I think that is historical nonsense. But more importantly, white, black, yellow or red supremacy is irrelevant if you are a follower of Jesus. Suppose you are a German and have a superior theoretical intelligence. Suppose you are Japanese and have superior marketing skill. Suppose you are an American and have superior technological prowess. It doesn't matter! It is irrelevant in the way you treat people. "The first shall be last." "Unless you turn and become like a child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." "He who would be great must be the servant of all." If you love Jesus, race and nationality cannot determine how you treat people. If you love Jesus you will have a universal good will toward people everywhere. That's what Jesus meant when he said "Bless those who curse you." You can't bless somebody if you desire their harm. So if you are a follower of Jesus you must desire the good of everyone, no matter what their race or nationality.

That is the point of the book of Jonah in the Old Testament. Let's look at it together. Not too long after the ministry of Elijah and Elisha another prophet came onto the scene in the northern Kingdom of Israel during the rule of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). His name was Jonah son of Amittai from Gathhepher near Nazareth. The word of the Lord came to Jonah: "Arise and go to Nineveh, that great city and cry against it; for their wickedness has come up against me" (1:2). But Jonah does not want to go. Why? Is it because Nineveh was a chief Assyrian city, a foreign, Gentile city? Was he afraid? The answer is in the back of the book! We'll find out in a moment.

Whatever the reason, Jonah heads the other direction: toward Tarshish, on the other side of the Mediterranean. But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea and the ship threatened to break up (1:4). When the sailors found out Jonah was fleeing from God, they were dismayed. But Jonah said "Take me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you" (1:12). So they pray for forgiveness and toss him overboard. And "the Lord appointed a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (1:17). But Jonah called to the Lord out of his distress and God answered him (2:2) and the fish spit him out on dry land (2:10).

"Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time saying, "Arise, go to Nineveh that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you" (3:2). So Jonah goes and he walks through the city crying out, "Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). He pronounces God's judgment on the city for its wickedness. And, would you believe it, "the people of Nineveh believed God" (3:5) and they and their king repented and turned from their evil ways. So verse 10 of chapter 3 says, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God repented of the evil which he had said he would do to them; and he did not do it" (see Jeremiah 18:7f).

Then comes the key to the book and the reason why Jonah had headed for Tarshish instead of Nineveh. Chapter 4 verse 1:

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 is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil.

Jonah was a racist, a hyper-nationalist. He did not want to go to Nineveh because he knew God would have mercy on his enemies. He did not want their repentance; he wanted their doom. Quite contrary to the spirit of Jesus he did not have good will toward his enemies. He was not about to bless those who used to curse him. He was a hard liner and God was too soft. So he goes outside the city to sulk.

Does that remind you of anybody in the New Testament? The N.T. Jonah is the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. And the lesson of that parable is the same lesson as the book of Jonah. The younger brother squanders all the father's bequest in immoral living and heads for home. All the while the older brother has been thinking of how superior he is to this black sheep of the family and how much he deserves from the father. But when this no-good brother comes home, what happens? The father puts a ring on his finger, a coat on his back, kills the best calf for him and throws a party. Then the older brother hears about it and what does he do? He refuses to go in. He is angry that the father has shown mercy. Just like Jonah outside Nineveh, the elder brother sulks outside the father's house. They don't like the free mercy of God. It calls their supremacy into question. What could make a Baptist Klansman angrier than to have to offer God's mercy to a black community? What could make a Nazi angrier than to have to take the mercy of God to a Jewish ghetto? What could make a nationalistic American angrier than to have to bear the news of divine forgiveness to Tehran or Moscow? The lesson that God was trying to teach Jonah and us through him is that God loves to show mercy and that we his people should "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8). And it's implied in the very word "mercy" that no racial or ethnic or national barriers can disqualify a person from God's love and our love.

Jonah had not yet learned his lesson, so God continues with his education in 4:6. Just like God had mercifully appointed a fish to save the rebellious Jonah in 1:17, so now he appoints a plant to give the sulking Jonah shade. God is a very patient teacher. But he is also very wise. He next appoints a worm to kill the plant and ruin Jonah's shade (4:7). Then he appoints wind and heat to make Jonah miserable (4:8). Jonah has two responses: he is angry that his shade is gone (4:9) and he evidently makes out to God that he pities the plant. And now God has him where he wants him. "You pity the plant, Jonah? You didn't labor over it; you didn't make it grow; it came and went in one night. But, Jonah, I did labor over Nineveh, I did make it grow, and I've been at work on Nineveh not one night but for years; and shouldn't I pity its 120,000 people and all its cattle? Shouldn't I be angry if this city fails to give me glory, if you are angry that your plant no longer gives you shade? Who do you think gave food to the cattle and wisdom to the calves so they know how to suckle from birth? Was it not I the Lord? I don't want these cattle to go up in the smoke of judgment; I want them to be enjoyed by a repentant and redeemed people. I created them to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth (1 Tim. 4:3). Jonah, forsake your racism. Forsake your nationalism and follow me. You owe your life to me. Therefore, "be merciful as your father in heaven is merciful" (Luke 6:36).

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-piper/the-education-of-a-prophet/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net