

Shaping Holy Hearts, Whose Righteousness?

Read Jonah Chapter Four

If God gave you the opportunity to go into Kabul and save everyone in that city, would you take it? Sometimes I think some people would say no simply because they see the people there as unsavable, not worthy of eternity with God. They might say they don't desire God's grace and mercy.

I am entirely aware of the irony of that statement; me self-righteously accusing someone of being self-righteous. But here we are judging each other all the time.

If you remember from last week, righteousness isn't ours. It's us standing in the righteousness of our Savior, Jesus. When I suggest that "those people" wouldn't save Kabul, it is my righteousness, based on what I think I know.

When I come into Christ's righteousness, my entire focus is on Him, doing the work He wants me to do. I have no time to worry about someone else's thoughts or actions.

God has called Jonah to Nineveh to give them a warning. But Jonah wants none of that and runs away, clearly disobeying God. I always think it's so funny that Jonah thought he could run from God. Surely he knew God would know where he was. Of course He did. The winds obeyed God when he ordered the storm. The sea obeyed God both in its rage and calm states. Even the whale obeys God! But not Jonah.

Jonah's eventual obedience created a revival in Nineveh. The words God gave Jonah for Nineveh led them to a visible change of heart. That day, over 120,000 gentiles had enough faith to fast, repent, and cry out to God hoping He would change His mind about their fate. God has great compassion for all His people, so he relented from the disaster Jonah had prophesied.

This burned Jonah's anger beyond reason!

Now, we know Jonah was a good man. He was a prophet, used by God during the exile. We see his faith and goodness in the beautiful prayer he shares from the belly of the whale; the prayer filled with praise and thanksgiving for the God he clearly adores. (Jonah 2:1-10) We even see it in his anger. Jonah confesses that He knew God would react with grace, mercy, and steadfast love for His people. (Jonah 4:1-3) In other words, he knew God's character; He would offer what we all want, including Jonah. Jonah wanted to be delivered, but he didn't want Nineveh delivered.

To better understand Jonah's anger, let's return to the question about Kabul. One might argue that losing the people in Kabul who hate God, hate us, and are so evil in their actions that they are beyond frightening, would be good for the world.

But let's not lose sight of just what happened in Nineveh. They didn't just hear the words of Jonah; they immediately believed them. (Jonah 3:5) The king drove the charge of fasting and

repenting. All he had at that moment was hope that God might change His mind about the people. An entire city, perhaps 120,000, came to know The God! Can you imagine?

What a joyous day it would be if the entire city of Kabul accepted Jesus! The celebration in heaven would be fantastic!

We all are foolish at one time or another. Our humanity sometimes overtakes our reason. Certainly, Jonah's passion overwhelmed his reason that day. He would rather die than watch the success of the Nineveh people. I can see him stomping off to die, angry beyond reason, perhaps similar to a two-year-old who doesn't get their way.

God shows incredible patience with Jonah, much like He did Nineveh. Jonah's tantrum left him in the day's heat, but God provided refuge in a plant. But when that plant withered and died from a worm God sent, Jonah complained, again.

Let's contrast how Jonah had no concern for the souls of the people of Nineveh but showed great concern for his own physical welfare when the tree was gone. God asks him if he should be mad at the plant. And Jonah cried out, "yes, angry enough to die!"

The wind obeyed God. The whale obeyed God. The people of Nineveh obeyed God! The plant obeyed God. The worm obeyed God. And Jonah STILL didn't get it.

But the Lord said, "You have been concerned about this plant, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?" (Jonah 4:10-11)

The book ends with God posing a question to Jonah that basically means, "are you really more concerned about a plant you just met last night than the 120,000 souls of the people of Nineveh?"

Jonah's story symbolizes Israel's disobedience and dissatisfaction with life with God. But our God is so good and loves us abundantly. We all have "Jonah" moments, but He waits for us to run back to Him, and has open arms.

God's love for ALL of His people was supposed to be mediated through God's chosen and covenant nation. The book of Jonah is a glorious reminder of that love.

Week 2 challenge - Do you ever have trouble knowing without a doubt that you are right, and wanting to prove it? Maybe it's in a discussion, or when you see something outrageous on social media. Take this week to not worry about being right, but rather show your love and compassion without worrying about what's right. Ask yourself what's more important, being right or loving like Jesus; correcting someone or saving their soul.

Prayer - Elohim, your perfect love is beyond what our human minds can comprehend. Your mercy is a gift that reminds us of your power and strength. You are all we need! Amen.

Have you ever been so angry that you were beyond reason? Were you right? Did it matter?

Jonah loved God, but honestly felt that Nineveh had no right to be saved. What are your honest thoughts about this?

God never changes His holy standards, but he can and does adjust to our actions. How does that make you feel?

Will the story of Jonah make you rethink your attitude toward anyone or a group of people?

Dive deeper

Read Acts 9:1-19

What similarities do you see in Paul and Jonah in their current situations? What differences?

Read Philippians 3:1-11

How did Jesus make a difference to Paul?

Have you ever found yourself in a place where you relied on your righteousness rather than on Jesus? Were you able to change your attitude? Do you think you could now?