

The Cost of Mercy

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[0 : 00] We're beginning a new series this week that will probably go through the end of May through the book of Jonah. There's a really well-known line in journalism, a rule you might call it, that says to journalists, don't become the story.

A reporter's job is to deliver the news, and the moment they find themselves in the news, usually something has gone wrong, right? Don't find yourself in the story. And if you know the story of Jonah, you know that Jonah could have used that advice.

God called Jonah on a really clear mission with a really simple message. And the book of Jonah is about how Jonah took that really clear mission, and he became the story.

He messed it all up. And that's what makes this book of the Bible famous, right? Kids love it. It's all about, you know, man disobeys God, gets eaten by a fish. It's a great story.

And it's interesting. It's a fascinating book. But at the same time, the reason that we're going to be looking at this over the next few weeks, it's not just because it's a neat story, even though it is that.

[1 : 04] It's because God uses the life of Jonah and even the disobedience of Jonah as the backdrop to teach us about who he is and who he's called us to be.

And that's why Jonah matters. And that's what we're going to see over the next few weeks. So we're going to read Jonah, just the first three verses of chapter one. We won't always go this slow.

But these first three verses, they're really packed. Okay. So Jonah one, verse one. Now, the word of the Lord came to Jonah, the son of Amittai, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me.

But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went down into it to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

Now, you could have guessed this already, but one of the things that makes the book of Jonah unique among all the other prophetic books is that Jonah is the only prophet in the whole Bible who was called by God and didn't do what God said.

[2 : 19] And what we just saw in those first three verses is that when Jonah disobeys, he disobeys all the way. So God says in verse two, he says, Arise and go to Nineveh, go east of Israel.

That's where Nineveh was, east of Israel. And what does Jonah do? He arises and he goes west towards Tarshish. Why Tarshish? Nobody knows. We can make some guesses.

But the point is, Jonah hears God's call and he goes as far away from that call as he can get. And the obvious question when you come here in the first three verses is why?

Why does the prophet of God run away? And the writer of Jonah, the writer of the book, we don't know who it was, but he will tell us exactly why Jonah runs away.

But he makes us wait until chapter four. OK, but even so, any Jew who would have read this story, all he would have needed were the first three verses of this book to know exactly why somebody like Jonah would have run away from a call like this.

[3 : 22] And the most obvious reason is that Nineveh was a nasty place. OK, Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian Empire, one of the greatest empires the world had ever known up to that point.

And the thing to remember about the Assyrian Empire, what really matters when we're trying to understand this book is the Assyrians were powerful. But what made them famous was the way they kept their power.

OK, so if you ever get a chance to go into the British Museum, I haven't, but I've seen pictures. The British Museum is one of the most famous museums in the whole world.

And they've got a whole section there dedicated to the Assyrian Empire. And when you go in there, one of the parts of the exhibit are these giant stone walls that they have brought from Assyria, from places like Nineveh.

And you walk in and it's absolutely beautiful. There are these carved mosaics of scenes from the Assyrian Empire. And you walk in and you say, wow, this was 3000 years ago.

[4 : 24] These people, what artists, what beauty. OK, but then what happens is when you get closer to these mosaics, everything changes because you see what's actually going on in the mosaics.

And what the Assyrians would do is they would carve these beautiful scenes of them torturing their enemies. And they would do it over and over again.

All the different types of torture, they would put it on public display. And, you know, in our day and age, when a nation commits a war crime or some kind of atrocity, they try to hide it and or at least they downplay it.

But the Assyrians, they took the opposite approach. They wanted the world to know how ugly they could get because it sent a message to the rest of the world that said, don't don't come after us.

Listen to what we say. Bow down to us, because if you don't, you're going to face a fate worse than death or you're going to face death itself. They carved that brutality into stone so the whole world would know how nasty they could be.

[5 : 32] And all that to say, when God calls Jonah to go to Nineveh, he is being called into the belly of the beast. He's being called into the capital city of the Assyrian Empire.

And you've got to imagine what Jonah would have been imagining, which he's thinking of himself walking into Nineveh past all these beautiful frescoes of the Assyrian enemies being tortured.

And then having the nerve to go eye to eye with these people and say, listen, my God says that judgment is coming on you. Who would not be afraid of a calling like that, right?

One writer put it like this. He said that Jonah going to Nineveh would have been a lot like a Jewish rabbi going to Berlin in 1941 to preach to the Nazis.

It would have been a deadly assignment. So that word Nineveh would have been enough to understand why Jonah would run away from an assignment like this. And that could have played a part in it.

[6 : 36] But there's actually something deeper going on here. Because when you get to the end of the book of Jonah, that's not the main reason why Jonah runs away from this assignment. What Jonah is really afraid of is not death.

Ironically, what he's most afraid of, you find out at the end of the book, but any Jew could have inferred it from the beginning. What he's really afraid of is mercy. Jonah is afraid to go to Nineveh because he is afraid of God's mercy.

He's afraid of even the possibility that God might show mercy to a people this evil, this nasty. Now, you may say to yourself, that doesn't make sense because there's no mercy here in these first three verses.

God tells Jonah to go condemn these people, to go tell them that judgment is coming. And that's true. Jonah was sent with a message of judgment. But any Israelite who worshiped the God of Israel would have known what happens, what can happen, when a prophet brings a message of judgment to a people.

They know about their God. They know about the God of Israel. And they know that the God of Israel has this habit, this tendency of being merciful sometimes, of giving people not what they deserve, not giving them the punishment they deserve.

[7 : 56] So here's how Jonah could have thought about it. A conversation he might have had in his head. He might have said to himself, as he's thinking about, should I go to Nineveh? He could have said, God wants me to go to Nineveh to tell these people that judgment is coming.

But if I go, well, they may kill me. But if they don't kill me, they may actually listen to me. And if they listen to me, they may repent. They may turn to the God of Israel.

And if they turn to the God of Israel, well, there's a chance that the God of Israel may show them mercy. Mercy to these people who have shown so little mercy to all of their countless victims.

One commentary put it like this. He said, Jonah simply wanted no part of something so horrible as mercy shown to a brutal, oppressing enemy nation.

Jonah could not bear the sight of God's mercy. And, you know, when you step back, and I think a lot of times when we think about the life of Jonah, the lesson we walk away with is disobedience is costly.

[9 : 04] You know, if you disobey God, you may find yourself in the eye of the storm. And we'll talk about that next week. That's next week's passage. But from these first three verses, I think if there's one lesson to take away, it's not the cost of disobedience.

It's actually the cost of mercy. Mercy is costly. And Jonah could not bear the pain of seeing a people like this face even the possibility of forgiveness.

And, you know, a strange Jonah story is strange, right? It almost sounds mythical, but it's true. But I think there's something, as different as it is from the lives that we live, there's something deeply relatable here, isn't there?

Because all of us know something about the cost of mercy. You know, all of us know that feeling of not being right with someone else. You know, someone has wronged us, or they betrayed us, or maybe they've just been a little rude to us.

And there's a part of us that doesn't want to be made right with them. There's a part of us that just wants to punish them. That just wants them to suffer, even if it's by giving that person the silent treatment. I know a lot about the silent treatment because I give it a lot sometimes.

[10 : 12] But there's a cost to mercy, to saying, I forgive you. And maybe one way to think about how we're like Jonah is to ask yourself, how gifted are you at holding a grudge?

Is that something you're good at? Because if so, you may be a lot like Jonah. Because Jonah wanted to hold on to the grudge. He wanted these Ninevites to suffer for the things that they had done all their lives.

And I think that speaks to a part that we all struggle with at some point in our lives. As I was thinking about this passage, one of the best illustrations that came up to me over and over again that I remembered was the story that Corrie Ten Boom tells after World War II.

You know, Corrie Ten Boom was famous because she wrote that book, A Hiding Place. At Corrie Ten Boom, she was a Christian living in Holland, and she had sheltered Jews during the Holocaust. And she eventually got arrested and went to a concentration camp herself.

She went with her sister, and her sister passed away in the camp. And after the Holocaust, she made it her life's mission to talk about mercy and to talk about forgiveness.

[11 : 26] And she took a trip in 1947 to Germany, and she took a tour through German churches to tell them about God's forgiveness. And you can imagine the power of that, right?

Here's a Holocaust survivor going to Germany, telling these people, whatever you've done, God can show you mercy. But she says that there was one day that was one hard day.

And it was when she gave a talk on God's mercy in this German church in Munich. And after her talk, a man got up and came up to her, and she immediately recognized him as one of the guards at the concentration camp where she had been.

And she said the moment she saw him, she started getting flashbacks of the last time that she saw him. And here's what she writes. She said, My sister and I, we had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation in Holland.

And this man had been a guard in the concentration camp where we were sent. Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out. He said, A fine message, Miss Ten Boom, how good it is to know that as you say, all of our sins are at the bottom of the sea.

[12 : 44] And she goes on and she says, And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, I fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course.

How could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women? But I remembered him. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors.

And my blood seemed to freeze. And he still doesn't remember who she is. He never recognizes her. But she says that this is what he said next. He said, Since that time, since the concentration camps, I have become a Christian.

And I know in my heart that God has forgiven me for the cruel things that I did there. But I would like to hear it from your lips as well, Miss Ten Boom. Again, the hand came out.

Will you forgive me? And she said, As I stood there, I, whose sins had every day to be forgiven, I could not. My sister had died in that place.

[13 : 48] Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply by asking? I think Corrie Ten Boom there, She's putting her finger on the cost of mercy.

How can we be merciful to people who have hurt us? To people who've done us wrong? To people who betrayed us? Or in Jonah's case, To a nation who's done so much evil.

And if you go back and read the article, She struggles in the moment, But she eventually does forgive him. And she sticks out her hand. But the whole point of the article was to say That it was so much harder than she thought it would be.

Even for someone like her, Who spent her life telling people, Forgive. She said, When it became personal, When it wasn't just an idea, But she was confronted face to face with the need to forgive.

She said, I almost couldn't do it. It was so painful. And sometimes, We all know that sometimes the cost of mercy can feel unbearable. And if that's true, Then the question that you're left with is, How can we learn to bear the cost of mercy in our daily lives?

[14 : 57] How can you? How can you practically learn to bear the cost of mercy every day? Because, Well, number one, Because one reason why we need to, Is because Jesus says that the character of a Christian Is that they're merciful.

Blessed are the merciful, For they shall receive mercy. But, It's not a hypothetical question. And that's what makes it so hard. You know, It'd be one thing to say, You know, To be a Christian is to say that if a Nazi ever does come to your door, A former Nazi, You've got to show them mercy.

And if God ever does call you to a foreign nation To tell the evil people that God can be merciful, Well, You've got to be merciful. But, But, Bearing the cost of mercy is so much harder than that, Right?

Because it comes at us every single day. Every day there's a chance to, To not forgive. Every day there's a chance in our lives to hold grudges, Or to not be patient, To be patient.

You know, Patience is a form of mercy, Right? You're, You're holding back from what you really want to say, Because, Because God calls you to be patient. He calls you to be merciful. And, What's interesting is that, In that story that Corrie Ten Boom tells, Later in the article, She says, She says, You know, I thought, That once I forgave a Nazi, I could forgive anybody.

[16 : 12] But, But then she said, But the, The moment, The moment that a friend betrayed me, I was right back into the, All the same old anger and hatred, That I always carried around, When I felt betrayed by somebody else.

And what she learned was, A heart of mercy, Is not something that, Maybe when you become a Christian, It just gets inside of you, And you're, It's just, Mercy's easy after that.

No, What she learned was, Every single time mercy is asked of us, It can be painful. And, And the, The way to grow, Is to continue to fight against that pain, And to show mercy.

Otherwise, Our hearts can turn, Right back to stone. Our hearts that have been soft, And can turn to stone. Or, To put it in the language of Jonah, Every day there's a temptation for us, To run away from the presence of God, When God is calling us, To bear the cost of mercy, With our neighbor, Or with our friends, Or with the people that we love.

And sometimes we can look at God, And we can say, God, You know, This person slighted me just a little bit, But for whatever reason, Today I feel totally incapable, Of showing mercy. Right? We get, We get short, We get impatient.

[17 : 24] So, Again, But the question, Where does, Where does the power for mercy come from? How can we bear the cost of mercy? And I just want to give one place to start, And then we'll close.

It's this, Every time you struggle, I struggle, To forgive, Or to show mercy, Or to be patient, What we have to do is, We have to look at ourselves, And say, Where that person is standing, This person who needs my mercy, Who needs me to forgive, Who needs me not to hold a grudge, Who needs me to be patient, Anytime I see that person, Standing there, I have to say to myself, I have stood in that very spot, And I stand there right now, Because right now, I am standing in the presence of God, And I need His mercy, I need Him to show me mercy, For the person that I am today, So how, If that's true, How can I not look at that person, And show them the same kind of mercy, That God shows me?

And what happens there, It's like a habit, You know, Just like, How do you get better at baseball? Repetition, Repetition, How do you get better at anything?

It's repetition, What we have to develop in our hearts, Is the habit, Of any time we feel that bitterness, Come in to say, Alright, Who does the gospel say that I am? The gospel says that I'm someone, In deep need of mercy, And if that's true, How can I show that mercy?

How can I, How can I reflect, What I have received, To the world around me? Jesus, He told this parable, Of the unforgiving servant, Do you remember that story, Where there was a great king, And one of his servants, Owed the king a debt, That he could never pay back, He was in deep debt, He could never pay it back, And the only thing the servant could do, Was to come on his knees, And beg the king for mercy, Please forgive my debt, And the king did it, And then Jesus says, What does that servant do?

[19 : 26] He turns right around, And he goes to another servant, Who owes him, Just a little bit of money, And he chokes that servant, And he threatens to throw that servant in jail, If he doesn't pay back his debt, And anyone who hears that parable, Knows that there's something wrong here, And when the king found out, Jesus said, The king threw the first servant in jail, And Jesus is telling that parable, He tells that parable to each of us, To say, If it's really true, That God has shown you eternal mercy, How can you withhold that mercy, That patience, How can you withhold that, From the people in your own life, The people who make you angry, The people who wrong you, Who are in debt to you, How can you not show that mercy, And that's just as true, In the Old Testament, As it is in the New Testament, You know Jonah, He should have known this, He should have known this, And in his heart of heart, He did know it, Right?

Because, When you get to the end of the book of Jonah, One of the things he looks at God, And says is, After he ends up going to Nineveh, We'll see, He looks at God and he says, I didn't want to come here, Because I knew, That you were a merciful God, You know when you get mad at somebody, That you know and you love, And you say something like, It is just like you to do this, And that's kind of what Jonah is saying to God, He's saying God, It is just like you to be merciful, And he's saying it like an insult, But he's a fool, Because the only reason Jonah knows about God's mercy, Is because Jonah comes from a people, Who has received God's mercy, That's how he knew what God was capable of, Because he had received the same mercy, As a part of Israel, Over and over again the Old Testament says, Why did God choose Israel?

It wasn't because they were strong, It wasn't because they were righteous, It wasn't because they were great worshippers, All he says is, I chose you because I love you, I love you because I love you, And that's mercy, That's mercy, And anybody who gets that, When you get that down into your bones, That has to change you, Have you ever heard this, Some psychologists will say, They'll use this phrase in psychology, And they'll say, Hurting people hurt people, Right?

And there's truth to that, When people who have been deeply hurt, Sometimes the way that they respond, Is they end up hurting other people, But the same is true for forgiveness, In the opposite and wonderful way, Forgiven people forgive people, And that's what Jesus says, He says, If you've been so forgiven, Doesn't it make sense for you to forgive those, Who need you to forgive them?

And the beauty of the gospel, Part of it, Is that God never asks you and me, To bear a cost of mercy, Greater than the cost of mercy, That he was willing to bear for us, And if you think about it, Jesus did what Jonah was afraid to do, Jesus comes to an evil world, He preaches mercy in the midst of judgment, And people find repentance, And they find life in him, And he brings that message, Even though he has to bear the full cost of mercy himself, Jesus was who Jonah was not prepared to be, And when that becomes the center of your identity, That God relates to you on the basis of mercy, It has to change you, Here's the final word this morning, You can be a Christian for decades, And you can still struggle with mercy, Right?

[23 : 01] It can be hard, When you're 20, And 30, And 40, Or maybe 50 years, Into your Christian life, Still, To forgive, To show mercy, And it can creep up on you, And you can say, I thought I was a forgiving person, Until that happened, So, But remember this, In the midst of the struggle, That we have to be merciful, If it's true that God, Is as merciful as the Bible says that he is, Can we not at least believe, That when we go to him, And say, God, In your mercy, Help me be merciful, Can we not believe, That he will listen to that prayer?

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, We thank you for your great mercy, We thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ, Help us to bear, With one another, In love, And in doing so, Reflect, The power of the gospel in our lives, In your son's name we pray, Amen.