

The Character of Compassion

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 May 2019

Preacher: James Barnett

[0 : 01] Good morning. My name is James. I have a lovely wife. I have three children. But you probably know most of those things. Here are some things that you might be surprised to learn. I've been, you might actually know this one, I've been trying to learn Mandarin for many years and I'm pretty terrible at it. I love K-pop music. Do you know what K-pop music is? It's Korean pop music and it's wonderful. I can educate you later, don't worry. And I really like this Chinese sauce. It's called Lao Gan Ma. Does anybody eat this? Yes, this stuff is delicious.

You can try this on your jam and cream scone later on. This is really nice. As we get to know each other as people, we get to know what people like, but not just the positive things.

We also get to know the negative things about people, the things that are more sad than surprising, the hidden sins, the personal struggles. When you get to know these parts of me, these might drive you to drive you to anger instead of joy. What about when it comes to God? As we get to know God, are we surprised that God can be angry, that God can be full of compassion? What if God is not as we expect him to be? For Jonah, God wasn't what he expected. God showed a character that Jonah was not very happy about. How do we react when we find out something new about God or when we see a truth?

How do we react when we thought he was going to be different? What happens when we are confronted with an aspect of God that we weren't prepared for? Do we run and hide? Do we allow God to reveal himself to find out more about him? As we conclude our series on Jonah today, at the end of mission month, we are going to be confronted with a God of wrath and a God of compassion.

And we're going to be asking the question, how do we respond as we get to know our God? And today we're going to be challenged by our view of God and our view of other people.

[2 : 37] And we're going to do this in an attempt to understand God better. So as we do this, let's pray as we look at Jonah chapter 4. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this journey through the book of Jonah, that you have not only revealed yourself to us through your word, but you reveal who we are and what we are like as people. Father, help us come before you in dependence upon you.

And Lord, help us not run away when we learn more about you, but run to you instead. Amen. As we've seen over these four short chapters in the book of Jonah, Jonah has been called by God to go to Nineveh and preach. Instead, he fled in the opposite direction. And then he was swallowed by a fish.

And finally, he went to Nineveh. He preached about the coming of God's wrath. And Nineveh repented. They turned from their ways, from the people at the very top of society, the king, all the way down to the very bottom. This is wonderful. It is great news. God's word has been proclaimed.

And people have listened and responded. It's what every prophet, it's what every preacher dreams and prays would happen. That people would be confronted by God's word and have their lives impacted.

What better response to Jonah's preaching than the whole entire city repents. They change their ways. How many prophets and preachers have had that kind of impact? And it's a bit of a surprise that this book doesn't actually end in chapter 3 with Nineveh repenting and turning to God.

[4 : 27] This seems to be the high point of the book. Why did it not end there? At this point, we think Jonah, he should be joyful. He should be amazed at God's word has been preached and people have repented. He should be joyful. But he's not. Have a look with me. Jonah chapter 4, verse 1. But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong. And he became angry. It seems like a bit of a two-year-old temper tantrum meltdown. Verse 2, he prayed to the Lord, Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abounding in love, a God who relents from calamity. Jonah is saying, you know, God, I knew you would pull this kind of stunt. These people are evil. They should have been wiped out. Nothing is going to change.

They're just going to act scared for a little while. And while you show the mercy, God, you're just hopeless. They don't deserve your love. Your love is for Israel. No one else.

And because you've done this, verse 3, take away my life. It is better for me to die than to live. Now, this seems like a bit of an overreaction from Jonah. God's grace and mercy to Nineveh has revealed Jonah's real problem. God has turned out to be a different God than who he thought.

Jonah had built this box and put God in it. Jonah wanted God to be someone who had exclusive love and compassion for Israel, for his people. And it was wrath and anger for other countries.

He's seen Assyria with its capital at Nineveh. They've risen in power. They've invaded others. They've been incredibly violent, brutally killing many others. And Jonah wants God to show his wrath to them and not his love and compassion. That is why in chapter 1, he flees from Nineveh.

[6 : 50] He doesn't want God to get the opportunity to relent and show compassion, to reveal his love and mercy. He was worried that God would show his compassion. And so Jonah's response to God being different, to not being the God he wanted, is that he wanted to die. Jonah's effectively saying, God, if you're not going to give me what I want, if you're not going to be the God that I want, then do you know what? My life has no meaning and it may as well end right now.

Nineveh's repentance was pleasing to God, but it was threatening to Israel's political interests. They were the massive superpower at the time. They were invading other countries and crushing other countries. And it was very likely to happen to Israel. And in fact, it would later.

Jonah didn't want Nineveh to repent. He wanted them wiped out as a political enemy. Because Jonah cared more for his interests, the interests of his people, than for the salvation of this city.

He valued God blessing his country over anyone else. And I think part of this comes down to racism. We're going to take a brief tangent from Noah. We're going to take a short sidestep. I'm going to talk about racism for a moment. Firstly, I don't believe that within humanity, there are different races. I don't believe that there are different races within humanity. I believe that the idea of race was created to justify one skin color being preferred over another skin color.

And traditionally, the lighter the skin color, the better, the darker, the worse. Racism, race was created to justify slavery. I believe that there are humans and that within humanity, there are different ethnicities. Ethnicities are good. Ethnicity is a biblical term. Our ethnicity is actually going to endure and continue into heaven. We see this in Revelation chapter 7. At the end of all time, where all nations, tribes and people and languages will be praising God. And this is something that we love. This is something we celebrate here at St. Paul's, that it is our transcultural identity, that we are people from different ethnicities and we get to praise God together just like it will be in heaven. All of our ethnic backgrounds are different and we are all shaped in God's image and we all, all of our ethnicities have value, but no one culture is the culture. None of us have the right God culture. God wants all of our ethnicities and all of our cultures to be shaped and grown to be more like God, to be more like the way He wants us to be. But I think our ethnicity, it is so tightly related to our identity. You know, for me, I'm an Aussie, I love cricket, you know, we might say I'm

[10:10] Chinese, I'm Sri Lankan, and we can hold so tightly to our ethnicity that it pits our ethnicity against somebody else's ethnicity, to somebody else's people group. A proper way of describing racism would be ethnic pride. My group's way of doing church is the best. My group's food is the best. You know, Lao Gan Ma, I agree, that stuff is delicious. It's my people's way of doing things is better than your people's way. It's pride, it's arrogance that is a defense of our people group. And I think it is something that is very dangerous and it's something that we need to be aware of and to avoid.

Jonah has fallen into a trap of ethnic pride. The God of Israel, His people would have compassion only for Israel. We need to be aware here as a church that the things we desire to see, the way we want to see church done, is the best for all of us. And it's not just ethnic preferences. It's not just my people's way of doing things. It is something that we as a church are journeying towards, becoming trans-cultural, becoming a culture defined by the cross, as we want to treasure Jesus together.

Now that is a brief but important tangent on racism. Please come and talk to me later about that. But coming back to Jonah 4 with his problem of racism, he has the audacity to quote God back to God.

The God that he knew that he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, in verse 2, it's a quote from Exodus 34 that John Sock read for us before, where God reveals himself to Moses. And it's interesting because Jonah here, he reads God's words selectively. He ignores the last part, which says from Exodus 34, yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.

Jonah just remembered the part about God's love and compassion and said, I knew you were that kind of God and I didn't want you to be that kind of God to Nineveh.

[12:37] He forgot that God was also a God of wrath who would punish those who are guilty. He uses God's words to justify his position of anger, but he doesn't read the whole paragraph.

He just chops out a verse at the end that he doesn't like. He forgets who God revealed himself to be. And he makes himself look silly. It's very dangerous to pit God's word against God.

One of the other people, I think it's the only other person in the Bible, guilty of twisting and quoting God's word against God is Satan himself. Remember in the Garden of Eden, Satan twists God's word to Adam and Eve, and he does it again to Jesus, tempting Jesus.

While Jonah had been down a couple of chapters ago in rock bottom when he was in the belly of the fish, he saw his need for God's grace. Jonah has forgotten God's word and only remembered part of it that he liked.

And he's created a simplistic picture of God who just loves everyone without any judgment on evil. He was so worried that God's character of compassion, he fled instead.

[14:05] This is a danger for us. This was a prophet who spoke with God himself, who forgot about what he said, and then got so angry with God he wanted to die.

How much more careful do we need to be there? Our God is bigger than we know. He is more complicated than we know. We can't put him into a box like Jonah did.

We can't simplify him into a stereotype of a God who doesn't judge but only loves. It is possible to use the Bible selectively to justify our actions, to create a version of God that suits us.

It's possible to read the Bible selectively confirm our opinions against those who don't follow Jesus, or those who are different to us, or those who don't hold the same views.

It's easy to think that our understanding of God, our theology is superior to anyone else's. It can be easy to read the Bible and think, yes, I'm right.

[15 : 16] I always knew I was right. You know, we shouldn't have voted that party in last week. Or I'm so glad we did vote that party in last week. If we read the Bible and it makes us feel that we are right, that we are righteous, we are reading it wrong.

Go to the book of Romans. Be reminded of our sin and our dependence on God. When we read the Bible, it should humble us.

It should change how we view our God. It should encourage us with God's love and grace despite our flaws. It should remind us that our God is loving and compassionate and generous more than we could even know.

As we draw closer to God throughout our lives, His different aspects will be revealed to us. Our God doesn't change, but our understanding of Him does.

Back in February earlier in the year, we did a month-long series on prayer. And ever since that, I've been reading through the Psalms. I aim for every night to read a Psalm and then to pray through that Psalm.

[16 : 28] And there was this one week, I can't remember, it was maybe about two months ago, where every single night, the Psalm was about the same thing. It was about David praising God about how great God was.

And let me surprise you by you all getting to know me a little bit more and getting to know my sinful heart a little bit more. After a week of the same theme, praying about how great God was, I was sick of it.

I just kind of had had enough with that theme and thought, it's time to move on to something else, David. I had a moment of being in bed. It was about 11 o'clock at night, I remember it.

And I was just in that in-between stage between reading the Psalm, meditating on it, and then praying. So I was in this in-between stage and I was just grumpy.

Not full-blown Jonah angry, I want to die. But I was just a bit annoyed with God. Ah, why do I need to praise God again?

[17 : 36] I've had a week of this. Come on. And I sat in this funk for a minute. And then God hit me. I can't describe it as anything other than God just revealing himself to me in that moment.

That he is so awesome and he is so amazing that he deserves not just a couple of minutes of a week's night of prayer, he deserves every moment of praise.

He deserves to be praised every day. Every moment of my life. And in that brief moment, my view of God was changed. Now, I knew he deserved all the praise before that, but God surprised me.

Our view of God will change, not because he changes, but because we seek to grow and move closer to him.

And when we do that, we can see him more clearly. Are you growing closer to God? Have you had your view of God challenged? Have you been surprised at God's wrath against sin?

[18 : 44] Have you been surprised by God's love and compassion? Brothers and sisters, let me encourage you to do something like what I've been doing, which is trying to spend some time in prayer every single night, going through the Psalms.

That's been wonderful for me so that I can be getting to know God better. Jonah's been angry with God, and now we see God respond. Have a look with me.

Chapter 4, verse 4. Is it right for you to be angry? God starts to deal differently with Jonah here. When Jonah fled, God was very firm with him.

He sent a storm to him. He was thrown into the ocean, swallowed by a fish. Now, God deals gently and patiently. It's like a parent who started with, you know, go clean your room.

Come on, man. Come on. I'll help you. He's changed his tack, and he asks him the type of question a therapist might pose to someone.

[19 : 42] Is it good? Is it right for you to be angry? And Jonah doesn't respond to God's gentle prodding. Instead, verse 5, he heads out of the city, and he sits down.

It seems that Jonah, still angry with God, he's gone and sat down outside of the city, maybe to see what would happen. God has decided to relent, to show compassion and mercy.

Maybe these people would slip up. Maybe they would change. Maybe they wouldn't stay repenting. Maybe they were going to revert to their own old ways, and God is going to send a meteor against them. And I want to be here to watch that happen.

Maybe that's Jonah's motive for sitting outside the city. Making his stay more comfortable, God sends a plant. A plant grows up.

It's a big leafy plant that grows up and gives Jonah shade. It eases his pain. It makes him happy. And after a horrid couple of chapters, he's fled from God.

[20 : 43] He's been on a ship in the middle of a storm. He's been in the belly of a fish, spat out, preaching repentance to a city who didn't want it. Now he has a moment of joy and happiness and peace.

It's that moment of finally sitting down with a tea or a coffee and taking that first sip. Oh, joy. But verse 7, At dawn the next day, God provided a worm which chewed the plant so that it withered.

When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die and said, It would be better for me to die than to live.

Jonah placated for a moment. He is now angry to die again. Angry enough to die. Life was good for those, you know, couple of moments with that plant over his head.

He couldn't even leave me in peace. It seems God has done all of this in preparation for God to teach Jonah something about who God is.

[21 : 47] This is the moment that the book has been leading up to. God asks him again, Is it right for you to be angry about this plant? Jonah sulking, I can't help but picture him like a child, arms crossed, humping around.

It is. It is right for me to be angry, and I want to die. God reveals something about himself in verse 10. 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 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left?

Jonah had compassion and wept over a plant. God has compassion over a city of people.

Jonah became attached to a plant that he had nothing to do with. He didn't even water it, but his heart was attached to it in some way, so that when it was destroyed, he was destroyed too.

[23 : 00] God says that he does the same thing with this city of Nineveh. He attaches his compassion, his concern, and his heart to these people.

Jonah, because he's a human, attaches his love and affection and his emotional dependence to a plant. He didn't look at it and make a mental choice. Oh, this plant is giving me shade.

I'm going to choose to love it. It's leafy and green. It meets his need and he gets attached. If you've ever seen the TV show with Marie Kondo about cleaning clutter out of your house, this is what she is working against.

You know, we get attached to things and we need to, you know, get rid of them. Alyssa and I have been cleaning out things. We cleaned out a lot of coffee mugs recently and it was really difficult because I was attached to them.

Didn't use a lot of them. You know, this is like one coffee mug I use. We have so many novelty coffee mugs that we just ended up throwing out. But I find them hard because I attach myself to them.

[24 : 05] But God doesn't need anything. God doesn't need a coffee mug that says, world's best God. He doesn't need a plant to give him happiness.

He doesn't need people. God doesn't need to get attached to things for no reason. God is totally happy within himself, within the Trinity.

The love between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, that is enough because that is love. He doesn't need anything. The only reason that he can love other things and show compassion to them is because he wants to.

God willingly chooses the things that he will attach his love to and compassion and grace. It's amazing that the God who created the universes, the stars, the galaxies, the planets, who can say, I care about these little people on this little rock.

what happens to them moves and grieves me. God is saying to Jonah, I am weeping and grieving over this city.

[25 : 14] Why aren't you? If you are my prophet, why don't you have compassion? Because the reality of it is Jonah is just not a very good prophet.

prophet. And Jesus is the prophet that Jonah leaves us wanting him to be. Jonah didn't weep for the city. He left it and was angry.

He went outside of it hoping to see its destruction. If he'd stayed and kept preaching to this city, maybe they would have followed God and not just briefly.

Jesus went into the city unlike Jonah. He went into Jerusalem and he wept over those who would not follow. Jesus didn't stay outside.

He went into the city and he was destroyed. He died on a cross so that the city, so that we could be saved. God has chosen to concern himself to attach his joys and his pains to us.

[26 : 22] So much so that he became like us. He became human, able to weep with us, able to laugh with us out of compassion. He not only grieved to see people lost, but was subject to the agonizing pain of crucifixion to take our place.

Jonah, full of racism and self-righteousness, cannot imagine God saving anyone else. Jesus, full of love and selflessness, cannot do anything but sacrifice himself to save people far from God.

Jonah wanted to hate, wanted God to hate the foreigner and only have compassion on Israel, but God's surprise character should not have been a surprise.

What surprises him is how his wrath and compassion play out together. For us, are we surprised that our God is a God of wrath who will judge the guilty, or that he is a God of compassion who will show mercy?

I've often heard people pit the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New Testament. The God of the Old Testament, he's all about wrath, and the God of the New Testament, he's all about love and mercy.

[27 : 44] Many people in the West would expect God to be a God of mercy, because we find it hard to accept that God should judge people. Maybe you've thought that yourself.

Other people who come from maybe a damaged or war-torn area, they have a background where they want to see God bring justice and wrath who punishes those who do evil.

that person can be surprised at God's free offer of forgiveness. Ultimately, God binds these two seemingly contradictory parts of his wrath and his compassion together, and they're combined in the cross, the place where his wrath is carried out on his son, so that his compassion and love can be shown to us.

The story of Jonah has a bit of a strange ending. After God gently prods Jonah to have compassion on the right things, we don't hear any more.

We don't find out what happens to Jonah. I wonder if it's possible that God surprised him with his compassion for the Ninevites, and Jonah went away and repented.

[29 : 02] I wonder if he was changed and that led him to write this book. I wonder. The question at the end leaves us to ask ourselves and to put ourselves into that very place.

Will we respond like Jonah? Will we be angry out of racist national arrogance? Will we see God's compassion on other people to be sent to preach a word of compassion and repentance?

Will we not just see mission month to be something that is nearly finished, mission month's nearly over, but as something to spur us on for the year to see God's message of repentance go forth to this city and to the world?

Will we let our own expectations of who God is get in the way of revealing, of God revealing himself to us? let me pray for us.

Dearest Heavenly Father, we thank you for how you have indeed revealed your compassion and your mercy and your love to people who do not deserve it that it invites.

[30 : 16] And Lord, we thank you that you have revealed that to us as well, people who are not deserving of your love. Father, we ask that we would continue to get to know you, to know who you are as our God, that you are a God who will punish the unjust, but you also show us mercy in the cross so that we can be brought into your family.

Heavenly Father, help us to continue to journey to get to know you, to love you more, to praise you more, and to have a willingness, a desire, to see your compassion and mercy spread out from here into Chatswood, into Sydney, and across the world.

And we ask this in your Son's name and for your glory. Amen.