



Session 1: Presenter Gary Brandenburg

I don't know about you but I think we could use a little love in our country today? It seems like all we hear about these days is anger and disunity and hatred and division. What is it going to take to turn that around? Here is one suggestion: The only way we will ever love people appropriately is to love God preeminently. The Great Commandment is to love God with all of your being and love your neighbor as yourself. Who is my neighbor? Anyone who is not me. Jonah displays a heart condition, one we are all susceptible to – hardening of the categories. He shows compassion and concern but only for those who are just like him. He is indifferent to the plight of those who were different. Indifference is a form of hate.

Imagine you are out for lunch and your friend starts choking on some food. You try the Heimlich but nothing seems to be working. You see a fire station across the street so you run over there and start screaming, “Come quickly my friend is dying.” When you get to the fire station you find all the fire-fighters huddled in front of a TV watching the Cowboy game munching on some snacks with their feet propped up. To your surprise, they don't move a muscle. You scream again. One of them holds up a hand and says, “Relax, there are only two minutes left in the game and then we'll send someone over.” Sound a little far-fetched?

Sometimes I wonder if God looks down at us and views us like those imaginary fire-fighters. By His grace He saved us from certain death and called into service in this cosmic battle for the souls of men. We possess the life-saving words of eternal life, but we are too often either ignorant of our calling or worse, we have found better things to do with our lives. We are indifferent to those who desperately need the Gospel. The message of Jonah is that God will do whatever it takes to save His lost children.

The book of Jonah is not about a whale. It's not even about a wailing prophet. This book is about God. God is a missionary God, but the people of God are frequently a selfish people. Certainly, that was true of Israel, which was intended to be a nation of priests, a missionary nation, acting to bring people to God by His grace. But instead of being a priestly people they became a prideful people who took credit for God's grace. They didn't proclaim God's grace, they possessed it; they didn't share it, they kept it for themselves as if it was theirs alone and they deserved it. So, God took the very best He had--Jonah--and sent him to Nineveh.

I. Jonah was called by God... vv. 1-2. Jonah was a faithful prophet. We don't know a lot about him except that he was a prophet from the Northern Kingdom of Israel during the eighth century B.C. It was a time of great crisis in Israel when Kings did "what was evil in the sight of the Lord." But Jonah followed Elijah and Elisha as a faithful ambassador for the LORD. **2 Kings 14:23-25** says, "In the fifteenth year of Amaziah the son of Joash king of Judah, Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel became king in Samaria, *and reigned* forty-one years. ²⁴ He did evil in the sight of the LORD; he did not depart from all the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel sin. ²⁵ He restored the border of Israel from the entrance of Hamath as far as the Sea of the Arabah, according to the word of the LORD, the God of Israel, which He spoke through His servant Jonah the son of Amittai, the prophet, who was of Gath-hepher." Jonah predicted prosperity and his words came true. Can you imagine if you could predict what the economy was going to do? You would be invited to every board room on Wall St. So, Jonah was a successful prophet. But past success is never a substitute for present obedience. Those who are faithful in small things are given greater responsibility.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah... God burst into Jonah's life in a unique way. There are only 16 men in all history who received the "word of the Lord" the way Jonah did.

"The prophets often described the sharpness of such an encounter: it was a sword in their spirits, a burden on their shoulders, a hammer breaking their rocky hearts, a fire raging within them. It was bitter to taste. It came. It could not be halted, and it forced itself on them unbidden. It gripped their minds and touched their consciences. It impelled their emotions. They could not escape the certain assurance that the voice of God was sounding in their hearts and must now sound to others through their lips." (Sinclair Ferguson) But Jonah was different. Jonah ran away.

II. Jonah disobeyed God's command. His response is summed up in one word, "but." When God gives a command you don't want "but" to be the next word. God said "Go," Jonah said, "No."

Jonah had a good reason to disobey God. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria. 550 miles from Samaria. Jonah was a Hebrew speaking prophet who had no track record in Assyria. Picture a Mexican immigrant walking into the Capitol building with a message to congress. Who's going to listen to him? Furthermore, Nineveh was the San Francisco or Las Vegas of the middle East. It was famous for being a wicked place. The Assyrians flaunted their wickedness. Even their kings had evil

sounding names like Ashurbanipal and Tiglath Pileser. These guys were not only powerful rulers who subdued their neighbors but when they defeated an enemy, they made a sport of it. They decapitated their victims and even flayed their bodies and attached the skins to the wall of the city. Here are some statements archaeologists have discovered among the records from the Assyrian kings: “I slaughtered them and with their blood I dyed the mountain red like wool.” “The heads of their warriors I cut off and formed into a pillar near the city.” “I killed him and spread his skin upon the wall of the city.” “I pierced his chin with my hand dagger and put a rope through his jaw.” Jonah has good reason not to go to Nineveh. It's hard for us to think that people who reject and attack our way of life could be objects of God's grace. After all, they're our enemies, so they must be God's enemies too. “We know we’ve made God in our own image when **God hates all the same people we do.**” **Anne Lamott**

III. Jonah paid the price for his disobedience. vv. 3-16. There are a number of consequences associated with a carelessness toward God’s call.

- a. When we reject God’s call, we are susceptible to being misguided by circumstances. Jonah went to Joppa and found what he wanted. “What a coincidence. A ship headed to Tarshish. You know, Tarshish is a place that needs to know about God. It must be God’s will. Why else would there be a ship at just the right time going to just the right place?” Have you ever noticed that when you want to run from God, there is always a ship going right where you want to go right when you want to go there? Never be guided by circumstances when you are refusing to be guided by God’s word. So, Jonah books a ticket to Tarshish.

- b. When we reject God’s call, we develop a calloused conscience...vv. 4-5. Jonah sleeps in the boat during a raging storm. One of the unintended consequences of saying “no” to God is callousness toward others. When we sense God is telling us to do something and we ignore Him then it gets easier to ignore Him the next time.

- c. When we reject God’s call, we often experience shame in the presence of unbelievers...v. 6. The captain of the ship says what God said, “Arise, go...” This is the definition of a true “wake up call” - when unbelievers have a higher standard than you have. They feared the LORD...v. 10; they rowed desperately to save Jonah...v. 13; they called upon the LORD...v. 14; they worshiped the LORD...v.

16. God is at work in the lives of these sailors even through Jonah's disobedience.

d. When we reject God's call, we lose confidence before God...v. 12. What a curious response. Not, "I will repent," but "Throw me overboard." He would rather die than change his heart. Jonah was a castaway not just physically but spiritually. He may have felt God had no more use for him.

Like Jonah, we face many tempting alternatives to doing what God has called us to do. Each and every day we wake up and enter a fierce competition between our will and God's will; our old man and our new man; the flesh versus the Spirit.

When we pursue our own plans, desires, ambitions, without respect for God's will, we will experience the uncomfortable side of God's grace. Sometimes God's grace is as unwelcomed as it is undeserved. Unwanted grace conforms our heart to God's heart. Jonah had the opportunity to see 600,000 people transformed by the Gospel. But Jonah's heart was out of sync with God's heart. He became the recipient of God's uncomfortable grace.

"How could grace be uncomfortable? I want all the grace I can get." Let me put it to you this way: If you had the choice to stand in a line that said, "God's grace - to live a highly successful life, to have the career I want, to be healthy and happy" or stand in one that said, "God's grace - to die from cancer with dignity, to lose a job and not lose heart, to lose a loved one without losing my mind," which line would you stand in? God's grace comes to us as He chooses for His purposes, His glory and our good. God's uncomfortable grace comes into our lives to transform theory into trust, to turn our heart back to God.

Loving God preeminently is the first step to loving all others appropriately.

God's people should share God's passion. The greatest distance Jonah had to travel was not the distance between Samaria and Nineveh. Not even the distance from Samaria to Tarshish. It was the distance between his hardened prejudice and his transformed heart. Jonah needed God's grace as much as the Ninevites. No one is qualified to receive the grace of God. Grace always comes to the unworthy. Grace is never the fruit of our good behavior. It is always undeserved favor. We deserve nothing, except maybe hell.

My friend Dan Gold is an ophthalmologist. He is also a Messianic Jew, meaning his blood is Jewish but he has embraced Jesus as his Messiah. He has volunteered to work with Mercy Ships in predominantly Muslim countries several times. One particular day, he was repairing cataracts on blind people when his next patient was a prominent Muslim mullah. Dan said he really wrestled with his feelings about giving this man his sight so he could propagate a false religion. But he knew

he was having racist feelings that were not pleasing to God so he did the surgery. The mullah was so impressed with the love of the medical team and of Dan, he wanted to show his gratitude so he took the Jesus video to all the Mosques in his district.

You have never looked into the eyes of a person who does not matter to God. You have never met a person who is not loved by God. He is calling us like He called Jonah to spread the word – “God so loved the world that He gave His only Son...” Go to Nineveh. It’s right next door.