

Week 5 – Nineveh Repents; God Relents – Jonah 3:4-10

Scripture Reading: Amos 7:1-9

Introduction

I can still see it happening in my mind's eye

It was one of my first days in kindergarten and Miss Fletcher was our teacher

I don't know how old Miss Fletcher actually was, she appeared ancient to me and my mom said she thought Miss Fletcher was old when she taught my mom's kindergarten class

And she wasn't one of those sweet old ladies either – I remember her being tall and thin and rather severe looking

She had taught kindergarten for a long time and she gave off the aura of having seen it all and tolerated none of it

And so it happened during play time that one of the boys had the audacity to throw a toy truck

Miss Fletcher descended on him like a fury as she grabbed him by his left arm with her left hand and proceeded to spank him with the ruler she held in her right hand

Of course the poor kid tried to get away so they proceeded to travel around the room – him wailing and her swatting until the ruler broke in two

That might have stopped some teachers but not Miss Fletcher; she just tossed the stub she was holding aside and continued paddling him with her bare hand until they had made a complete circuit of the room

The whole scene– Miss Fletcher's righteous wrath, the wails of that poor deviant, and the awe I felt watching the scene unfold – is etched in my memory

Of course, no more toys were thrown during that year of kindergarten and I, for one, determined right then and there to obey Miss Fletcher in all things – when she said sit, I sat and when she said it was nap time, brother I napped

Far too often we insist on learning from our own mistakes when we would do well to learn from the example of others

Our passage this morning is full of examples that we can learn something from – both positive and negative

And if we take these examples to heart and learn from them we might be able to save ourselves some unnecessary grief

Last week we looked at the first four verses of Jonah 3 and saw how God is the God of second – how he gave Jonah a second chance at obedience and Nineveh a chance to repent – chances that neither of them deserved

And this morning we are going to consider the remainder of Jonah 3 as we look at Jonah 3:4-10 where we will see the result of those second chances and what Jonah and the Ninevites did with them

If you haven't already done so, please open your Bibles and join me in Jonah 3 and follow along as I read verses 4-10

Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey. And he called out, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish."

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

If you are taking notes, Roman numeral one is: Jonah **Confronts** without **Compassion**;

Roman numeral two is: Ninevites **Repent** without **Reservation** and Roman numeral three is: God **Responds Rightly**

We've already discussed the wickedness of the Assyrians who lived at Nineveh and what Jonah thought of them

Jonah hated the Ninevites and he wanted God to destroy them so he ran the other way when God sent him to preach to them in the hope that they wouldn't get the message and have the chance to repent

And the events that followed: God arresting him with a violent storm, the sailors casting him into the sea to drown, the great fish swallowing him and carrying him around in its belly for three days before vomiting him up on dry ground, and God giving him the same task to perform **didn't exactly improve his disposition**

I think Jonah probably looked a bit like Miss Fletcher bearing down on a truck thrower when he hit Nineveh and began to preach

God's message to them and he **confronted** the Ninevites without showing them any **compassion**

I. Jonah Confronts Without Compassion

God sent Jonah to Nineveh to confront the Ninevites about their sin and to warn them of his impending judgement

And when Jonah finally got down to preaching he showed he was indeed a **confronter** but not necessarily a **converter**

Jonah was a practitioner of hell-fire, street corner, soapbox preaching and he started as soon as he hit Nineveh

That's what is meant by the phrase, *"going a day's journey"* – Jonah started and preached his message the first day and for the following two days

It took Jonah three days to hit all the public areas where he could give the Ninevites God's message

Jonah's message was short and to the point and what takes 8 words in our ESV Bible only takes 5 in the Hebrew

"Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"

Of course, we can't tell anything about how Jonah delivered the message, like his tone or his demeanor, but **I think he kind of enjoyed telling the Ninevites that they were doomed**

My dad once told me how his younger brother had done something wrong and my grandma told my dad to go and cut a switch so she could use it on his brother

My dad says he went and got the best switch he could, trimmed all the leaves off it, and how he delighted in cutting the air with it all the way back to the house – I think that my dad might have had a little Jonah in him right then

Of course, he completed the story by telling me that he had such a big grin on his face when he gave grandma the switch that it made her mad and she whipped him with it and never did get around to disciplining his brother

He said that was the last switch he ever cut for her

Anyway, God sent Jonah to confront and after initially rebelling against it I think Jonah warmed to the task in the end

Likewise, God's Word tells us that we are also to confront sin and to warn people that God will indeed judge it

It's our job to show the lost the reality of their sins because that's the only way to show them their need to turn to Jesus and we must confront those inside the church about their sins so they can deal with them and become more like Jesus

But historically the church has tended to have a **Goldilocks approach** to confrontation that is either too soft or too hard

Too soft

These days the tendency in the church is to shy away from confrontation and to have a live and let live mindset

Because the truth is most of us like to confront others about as much as we like to be confronted when we sin

When confronted with sin our tendency is to get angry and defensive; we resent the intrusion into our personal lives; we make excuses; we blame others or the situation we're in; anything but acknowledge our sin and repent of it

And so the church has ridden the pendulum toward the side of love, mercy, and grace so far that we neglect truth

We project a soft, loving Jesus who will accept anyone and allow them to continue doing anything and everything and never tell them they are wrong

And in doing so we show that we have adopted the thinking of our pluralistic society that no one should impose on anyone else

Too hard

On the flip side there are those who, like Jonah, actually delight in confronting others about their sins but they do so in such an angry way that they turn people off rather than turn them around

How many people do you think the folks from Westboro Baptist Church out of Topeka, KS reach with these sorts of displays?

I sincerely doubt they have been used of God to convict anyone of their sins – as repulsive as their behavior is they have likely driven more people away from Christianity than they've drawn to it

And if you spend much time on social media, like Facebook, you will soon encounter these types as they love to share inflammatory posts designed to lead to fights

Most of those folks aren't exactly *wrong* in what they are saying but their approach is wrong and their rants reveal an arrogant and combative attitude that is more repulsive than attractive

And I sincerely doubt that anyone who bothers to read their venomous posts says, "Gee, you make a good point. I need to turn from my sins. Tell me about this Jesus of yours."

Just right

Still, the reality is that we have the biblical responsibility to confront sin both inside and outside the church

But the key is we must do as it says in **Ephesians 4:15** and "*speak the truth in love*"

God has a plumb line as we heard in our Scripture reading a few minutes ago from **Amos 7** and he will judge any deviation from his standard

So we have a responsibility to help others but we must do so in the right spirit if we want to be heard and heeded

We must approach people humbly and tenderly out of genuine concern for them and their well-being and not with a judgmental spirit that delights in pointing out the error of their ways

Jonah

Jonah was obedient and he did exactly what God told him to do

But Jonah didn't come close to having love for the Ninevites when he delivered God's message

After all, he wanted Nineveh to be destroyed

But in spite of his wrong attitude and his unloving approach we see that the Ninevites quite surprisingly **repent** without **reservation** –

II. Ninevites Repent Without Reservation

I would have to imagine no one was more shocked by what happened next than Jonah himself was

Verse 5 begins with the surprising sentence: *“And the people of Nineveh believed God.”*

Two meanings of “hapak”

It’s very interesting that the Hebrew word that is translated in our ESV Bible as “*overthrown*” has two different meanings

The Hebrew word Jonah uses is “*hapak*” and it can either mean **to overturn** as we see it translated here but it can also be used to mean “turn” as in **to change**

Keep your finger in Jonah and turn with me to **Genesis 19:25**– where we read about God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

“And he overthrew [hapak] those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground.”

Now look at **Exodus 7:15**– where we see the account of Moses before Pharaoh

Go to Pharaoh in the morning, as he is going out to the water. Stand on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that turned [hapak] into a serpent.

And the same word, *hapak*, is used a couple of verses later in **Exodus 7:17** when the water of the Nile turned to blood

It’s also used in **Hosea 11:8** where it describes change in the Lord’s heart

Jonah went striding confidently into Nineveh hopping that God was going to *hapak*, or destroy, the city

But what happened was that God’s message caused Nineveh to *hapak*, or change, their behavior look at **Jonah 3:5** again

And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

What happened when the people heard what God had told him to say was not at all the *hapak* Jonah expected or wanted

The king

And the effect of his message didn’t stop there – look with me at **verse 6** where we see that the word reached the king of Nineveh

And when the king heard what was happening he also repented as he rose and humbled himself by removing his royal robe to put on a garment made of sackcloth and sat in ashes –

Activities that were the traditional signs of humility and the lowliness of contrition

Then the king issued a proclamation that everyone should demonstrate repentance as he had and that everyone, even the livestock, should wear sackcloth, partake of a total fast, and call our mightily to God

I want you to notice in **verse 8** how the king called on the people to turn from their evil ways and from the violence in their hands – but he didn’t have to spell out what that meant –

It seems the king knew that the people would know instinctively what he meant

The issue wasn’t that the people of Nineveh were ignorant of right and wrong and of what God considered to be sin – rather they lacked the moral restraint and even the desire to refrain from doing wrong

Do you think for a moment if the United States were to receive warning of God’s impending judgment for our sins that anyone would have any problem whatsoever in figuring out what we are doing that has offended God?

In spite of all the protests to the contrary and assertions that what is being done is only right and proper – everyone knows what sin is and no one would need to be told what God would be judging us for

People like to say that you can’t legislate morality but here the king of Nineveh did just that in hopes that God might relent and turn away from his anger and not destroy them

Define “repentance”

We saw previously that Jonah didn’t exhibit true repentance while in the belly of the great fish but rather he demonstrated a kind of counterfeit repentance brought on through attrition

In other words, God had made it very clear that there would be dire consequences for continued disobedience so he caved and agreed to go to Nineveh as God had commanded after all

So the natural question to ask is whether the repentance of the Ninevites was sincere or merely a dodge to get God to relent from destroying them

After all, it seems clear that the Ninevites responded to Jonah’s proclamation with fear and even though the people and their king were outwardly contrite it could be that there was no true repentance present

We need to recognize the following truths regarding what repentance is not:

Repentance is not **experiencing the feeling of guilt or even sorrow** for having done something wrong

Repentance is not **admitting** to having done something wrong

Repentance is not **doing penance** or even **making amends** for having done wrong

All of those things are a part of repentance but even all of them put together don’t equal repentance

In his Systematic Theology, Wayne Grudem defines repentance as: ***“A heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ”***

So let’s use that definition to see whether the Ninevites repentance was genuine –

1. The Ninevites repentance was in response to the Word of God

Had Jonah not come and delivered God’s message, there would have been no repentance in Nineveh and the Ninevites displayed a desire to alter their lives to suit God – true repentance comes from the knowledge of God’s Word

2. The Ninevites believed God

They took God seriously and trusted that he would do as he said and they demonstrated true faith in God by acting accordingly – their belief was not merely intellectual agreement but belief that resulted in the following actions:

3. The Ninevites humbled themselves and surrendered to God

They demonstrated heartfelt sorrow for their actions and rather than trying to defend themselves they put on sackcloth and fasted in true humility before God

4. The Ninevites changed their behavior

They renounced their wicked ways and their violence – this is significant – they were sorry enough to stop doing the evil

5. The Ninevites prayed

They called out to God mightily or urgently – their prayers were most certainly heartfelt and passionate – they meant the words they prayed as they no doubt renounced their past behavior and sought God’s mercy

6. The Ninevites displayed hope

They not only looked to the past of their sins but to their future as they trusted that God would be merciful

It seems obvious that the repentance of the Ninevites was genuine and God did indeed relent just as he promised the prophet Jeremiah he would do in cases such as this – look with me at Jeremiah 18:7-8 –

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.

When people say that the God of the Old Testament is harsh, mean, and judgmental show them these verses from Jeremiah and the example of Nineveh

God is the God of second chances and his desire is not to judge and destroy but to give every opportunity for repentance so that he can show mercy

When God finally has to render judgment on mankind it’s only because of mans’ refusal to yield in true repentance

We can learn a great deal about true repentance from the example of the people of Nineveh in this account

Relapse

Unfortunately, we also learn that repentance isn't necessarily permanent and it's possible to relapse

Approximately 37 years after their encounter with Jonah, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel so thoroughly that they became known as the "10 lost tribes" never to return

So it seems, at best, the next generation reverted back to the typically violent ways the Assyrians are known for

And we know through the prophet Nahum that God ultimately utterly destroyed Nineveh for continuing in their wickedness roughly 150 years after sparing them for heeding Jonah's message

Still, Jonah's preaching of God's message had a widespread and profound impact on the people of Nineveh

And just as God responded to Jonah where he was when he yielded in the belly of the fish, God also **responded rightly** to the repentance of the Ninevites

III. God Responds Rightly

God once again demonstrated that he is indeed the God of second chances as we see in **verse 10** –

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

The Ninevites' repentance leads to an outpouring of God's mercy

And in sparing them God acted in accordance with the promise we already looked at from Jeremiah 18

Some have questioned God's integrity in this matter saying that God went back on his word

But in truth, God acted consistently in accordance to his nature

See, the Nineveh that existed when God determined to destroy them no longer existed – they had repented and forsaken their previously evil ways

They had undergone a radical change so God was absolutely correct in not destroying the new Nineveh

Undeserved mercy

But in every real sense we don't obligate God to be merciful when we repent

In other words, God is not compelled to be merciful because of repentance – it remains his choice whether to show or withhold mercy

God doesn't owe anyone mercy and no one can demand it by force of their words or deeds – it is truly an unearned gift when God withholds the punishment we deserve

We can only be grateful that God is true to his promise to show mercy when true repentance is present

Our example

And God's approach to mercy in the face of repentance serves as our example as to how we should show mercy

Turn with me to **Matthew 18** where we will see what Jesus has to say about how we should demonstrate mercy

Let's look at **verses 21-22** – Jesus had just taught his disciples about how to handle matters of inter-personal sins within the church in verses 15-20

Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times.

Obviously, Peter is asking about how many times he should forgive a repentant brother who is seeking forgiveness

Rabbinical teaching at that time based on Amos 1 where God forgave Israel's enemies three times before punishing them caused Peter to think he would be doing really well if he more than doubled the number to seven

He expected Jesus to commend him for being willing to show extreme mercy but Jesus expressed a much higher standard for mercy for his followers to adhere to

Whether you view Jesus' answer as meaning 77 times or 490 times the answer is the same – you should forgive each time an offender demonstrates repentance

And then Jesus caps it off by continuing with the parable of the unforgiving servant to show that unlimited forgiveness is only a natural response to the recognition of how much you've been forgiven by God

The truth is, we tend to be just about as stingy with forgiveness as we are with second chances

But if we want to follow God's example we will be free in showing mercy and forgiveness to those who sin against us

Conclusion

Benjamin Franklin is quoted as saying: *“Experience is the best teacher, but only a fool will learn from no other.”*

We’ve seen several examples, both positive and negative, this morning and I think we would be wise to agree with Mr. Franklin and also with popular leadership author **John Maxwell** who writes:

“It’s said that a wise person learns from his mistakes. A wiser one learns from others’ mistakes. But the wisest person of all learns from others’ successes.”

I know I was grateful that I wasn’t the first toy-thrower in Miss Fletcher’s kindergarten class and that I could learn from someone else’s example

I’m also grateful for the examples we find in Scripture – both good and bad – because they can save me from having to go through the same things in order to learn the lessons of experience

In the case of Jonah we’ve seen a man who was reluctantly doing what God told him to do but who was carrying out his duty in a most unloving way

In the Ninevites we’ve seen a very wicked people who took God seriously and trusted his message enough that they fully repented of their evil and prayed for God to spare them

And in God we’ve seen the God of second chances who responded to their repentance and prayers by granting them the mercy they earnestly sought

I think we can agree that our current world doesn’t exactly take a back seat to Nineveh in the wickedness department. People all around us need to be tenderly and patiently but unwaveringly shown the reality and the seriousness of their sins if they are ever going to have a chance at the redemption that comes only through genuine repentance.

Likewise we need to show gentleness as we confront one another within the church concerning transgressions so that we all might grow to be fully mature believers.

And when confronted we need to demonstrate a heart of true repentance like the people of Nineveh so that we might restore our relationship with God and maintain a pure testimony before the world.

Lastly we need to be quick to forgive and extend mercy when repentance is evident.

We’ve seen some clear examples this morning.

Let’s pray that we might show wisdom by learning from them.