

God's Compassion, Our Compassion

Jonah 4:1-11

This may be a bit uncomfortable, but I'd like to begin by having you bring to mind your "enemies." I'm using the term rather broadly. In the NT, the noun enemy comes from the verb "to hate" or "have hostility toward." Your enemies are those whom you hate/dislike or those with whom you have hostility/conflict. They're not necessarily bad people; they may even be fellow believers. But who are the people you dislike or the people with which you have hostility?

Your enemies could be people that are out to get you in some way – in your family, in the workplace, in the community. Or perhaps your enemies stand in the way of what you want to do (or even what God wants you to do). Instead of encouraging you, they discourage you. Or your enemy may be somebody who hurt you deeply at some time in the past – either intentionally or unintentionally. Or perhaps there's a whole class or category of people that you don't particularly like. It could be people of another nationality, people of another world religion, or people of another political persuasion from you.

As you know, we usually feel very justified in disliking our enemies; after all, they're our enemies. But Jesus tells us, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Today we finish up our study in the book of Jonah. Jonah 4 is really a case study in "loving our enemies." Jonah had great antagonism toward his "enemies" (the Ninevites). But God wouldn't "let it go" in relation to loving his enemies; God forced Jonah to come face to face with the fact that he didn't love his enemies. Jonah 4 brings us face to face with the question of whether or not we will "love our enemies."

I don't really have a hot tip for finding the book of Jonah this week. But I discovered that if you Google "finding Jonah" you'll find a bunch of sermon series on Jonah where they've changed the "Finding Nemo" logo to "Finding Jonah." I'm not sure if it's legal, but it's sort of clever (and cheesy).

God confronts Jonah's attitude toward his "enemies." (Jonah 4:1-11)

At the end of chapter 3 we read that when God saw the repentance of the people of Nineveh, He relented concerning the judgment He had threatened. God in His sovereignty has the freedom to change His mind in this way. As a result, this massive Assyrian city was spared God's judgment. Notice Jonah's response in 4:1.

1 But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

Jonah's greatest fear was that Nineveh would repent and that God would relent concerning the judgment He had promised. And God had forced him (Jonah) to be the instrument of His compassion toward the Ninevites; they repented in direct response to his proclamation to them. This greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry.

To his credit, Jonah did what you're supposed to do when you're angry: he prayed to God and laid out his complaint. No matter how misguided and muddled our thinking, it's always good to talk with God about what makes us angry.

2 He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my own country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity.

I love the honesty of Jonah in this prayer. He actually admits that he tried to "forestall" God's compassion toward the people of Nineveh by fleeing to Tarshish. He would have preferred that they experience God's judgment, not His compassion. Jonah quotes a portion of Exodus 34:6 (God's self-revelation to Moses) when he speaks of God being "a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness." Of course Jonah didn't at all mind when God was gracious and compassionate to him when he found himself sinking to the bottom of the sea; but when it came to the Ninevites, God's compassion and grace angered him. He didn't mind that God was patient with him ("slow to anger"), but he wanted God's anger to burn toward the Ninevites.

If we're honest, we all face this tension. We don't always want God to be as gracious toward our enemies as He has been toward us. Jonah felt the full weight of the tension between what he wanted and what God wanted. He knew that he was no match for God. If he fought with God, God would win every single time. Given that reality, Jonah says:

3 "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." 4 The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"

Jonah echoes the words of Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4. There Elijah was running from Jezebel who sought to kill him. Sometimes the people who understand God the best find themselves in this type of personal, spiritual crisis because they see the issue so very clearly. Jonah came to the point of preferring death to life because he knew that his will was at odds with God's will. That's a depressing, demoralizing realization. Since God would win every single argument, every single fight, Jonah wanted to give up. Some people can ignore God and pretend like everything's fine, but Jonah knew God too well to do that. And so he wanted to die.

The other option, of course, was for Jonah to have a change of mind and change of heart. If he adopted God's compassion toward the Ninevites, the tension would be gone; he wouldn't have to lose any more fights with God because he would now be on God's side. This is why Jesus taught His disciples to say to God, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The only way to have peace and contentment in this life is to align your will with God's will.

God's response to Jonah is simply a question: Do you have good reason to be angry (lit. "hot")? God simply asks Jonah whether or not he really thought his anger was justified. We don't have Jonah's verbal response, but we do have recorded what he did next:

5 Then Jonah went out from the city and sat east of it. There he made a shelter for himself and sat under it in the shade until he could see what would happen in the city.

The temperature in that part of the world can easily reach 110 during the summer. And so Jonah made some type of simple shelter (perhaps woven out of branches) that would provide some shade while he waited to see what would happen to Nineveh at the end of the 40 days.

The Lord next gives Jonah an object lesson that drives home the point of the whole book of Jonah. This object lesson came in the form of a fast-growing plant

6 So the LORD God appointed a plant and it grew up over Jonah to be a shade over his head to deliver him from his discomfort. And Jonah was extremely happy about the plant.

Back in 1:17 God appointed a fish to swallow Jonah. Here He appoints a plant to shade Jonah and give him some relief from his discomfort. Apparently the shelter he had made wasn't really doing the job. But "Jonah was extremely happy about the plant." Jonah found great satisfaction in the plant that God had provided for his comfort. For the time being he forgets that he wants to die because God had spared Nineveh. For now he was happy about God's compassion toward him. But notice what God next appoints to teach Jonah the lesson he needed to learn:

7 But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. 8 When the sun came up God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on Jonah's head so that he became faint and begged with all his soul to die, saying, "Death is better to me than life."

Whereas earlier Jonah wanted to die because God had spared Nineveh, now he wants to die because he's on the verge of sun stroke. He became faint and begged God with all his soul to take his life. Once again death was preferable to him over life. But notice how God asks Jonah another question similar to the first:

9 Then God said to Jonah, "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "I have good reason to be angry, even to death."

Jonah felt fully justified in his anger about the plant. That plant was the one source of happiness in his life and God took it away. This is so true to life. We often feel justified in our anger. God drives home the point of the object lesson in verses 10 and 11. Having gotten Jonah to admit that losing the plant had made him angry enough to die, God makes a comparison between Jonah's compassion and His own.

10 Then the LORD said, "You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight.

In a sense Jonah had compassion on the plant; he cared deeply about that plant. By the way, the Lord points out, Jonah didn't have a thing to do with its existence or growth. And it's not like Jonah had a long-term relationship with this plant; it came up overnight and perished overnight. By using the term "perish" the author is making a link between the fate of the plant and the fate of human beings. In chapter 1 the sailors aboard the ship feared that they would perish in the storm. In chapter 3 the king of Nineveh held out hope that God would relent and they would not perish. Jonah's concern for the plant which perished is rather trivial in relation to the humanity all around him that was in danger of perishing. That's really God's point in verse 11. In light of Jonah's compassion for the plant, God asks:

11 "Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?"

God does for Jonah what He does for every one of us: He invites Jonah to look at the world through His eyes, in light of His character, with His purposes in mind. God wanted Jonah to understand that Nineveh was a great city that He cared deeply about. It contained more than 120,000 people who were created in His image. Not knowing "the difference between their right and left hand" is probably a way of saying that they were morally clueless and ignorant (and therefore helpless). By contrast, Israel had the advantage of having the Law and the Prophets. The point is that if Jonah cared so much about a short-lived plant in which he'd invested nothing, certainly God had every right to care about a city full of people in which He'd invested much.

Interestingly, it wasn't insignificant to God that Nineveh contained "many animals." (You may remember from chapter 3 that in addition to the people, the animals were required to fast and wear sackcloth. That's not necessarily why God mentions the animals; but they were part of their city-wide repentance.) At the very least this comment should make us realize that God notices and cares about more than humans. The rest of the animal kingdom was created to bring Him glory also. It would have been a grievous thing if He had been compelled to wipe out the animals in Nineveh because of the wickedness and violence of the people of Nineveh. There are many other Scriptures that indicate that humanity has great capacity to affect the rest of the created order for good or for evil.

The book of Jonah is left unresolved. We don't know how Jonah responded to God's logic and if he aligned his compassion with God's. We are left wondering if Jonah was convinced in heart and mind or whether he lived the rest of His days in anger and bitterness.

God confronts our attitude toward our "enemies." The strategy of author of the book Jonah is rather ingenious. We are drawn into the plot of Jonah's life and we find ourselves thinking, "It sure would have been better and easier for Jonah if he had obeyed God in the first place. He was foolish to try to forestall the grace that God wanted to show the people (and animals) of Nineveh. Jonah should have accepted that God wanted him to be an instrument of blessing in the lives of his enemies."

If we're not careful we find ourselves thinking, "God, am I just like Jonah? Is it true that I would hate for You to shower Your compassion on my enemies? God, is it possible that I have more compassion for my garden or my house or my car than for people for whom Christ died? God, is it possible that you want *me* to be an instrument of blessing in the lives of *my* enemies? Would You would put me in a submission hold and make me miserable until I begin to look at people the way You do? God, am I just like Jonah?"

Loving your enemies is always hard. And sometimes it's very complicated; it takes great discernment to even know what form loving your enemies should take. But Jesus said in the SoM that loving our enemies is one of the distinguishing characteristics of His disciples. Anybody can love their friends, but His disciples also love their enemies and pray for those who persecute them.

As the book of Jonah suggests, it is very likely that God wants you to be an instrument of blessing in the lives of your enemies (see 1 Peter 3:8ff). You probably understand your enemy's sins and fears and weaknesses better than about anybody else; you've experienced your enemy's insecurities firsthand (that's probably why they're your enemies). It's possible that your compassion toward that person will speak louder than that of anybody else. You're the *last* person they'd expect to be patient and kind to them. Even if you have to say some hard things to them, you can do so in love; you don't have to be mean and insulting. In other words, like Jonah coming from Israel and speaking to Nineveh, you are in a unique position to demonstrate the gospel to your enemies.

Are you willing to love your enemies? If you're not there yet, are you willing to be willing? Are you willing to put yourself in a position to let God make you into a person who loves his/her enemies? The kingdom of God advances when we love our enemies.

Note: From a human perspective Jonah was probably right. If Nineveh had been wiped out in his day, Assyria wouldn't have conquered and taken the northern kingdom of Israel into exile in 722 b.c. She was a military enemy that God had the opportunity to destroy before she became too dangerous. Nineveh's repentance didn't turn her into a friend of Israel and Judah; she didn't become a beacon for truth and righteousness. Those things may be true, but God still wanted to pour out His compassion on Nineveh, and He wanted to use Jonah in the process. God's ways are so much higher than our ways.

And from a human perspective, it probably makes no sense for you to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." But a disciple is one who prays to God, "Your will be done" in me and through me.