

A Troubling Grace

Jonah 4

August 22, 2010

Introduction:

This past week it's official: our youngest daughter began her first day of kindergarten which means the Borkowitz family now has three school-aged children. Dirty diapers, potty training, afternoon naps, and watching Barney the purple dinosaur are all things of the past. Now there are many benefits that come with having your kids move beyond pre-school and into their school-age years and one benefit is that they're finally at a place where they begin to share in some of the chores around the house. Let's face it: you really can't expect much when you ask a three-year old to clean up her room, but you should expect a fairly good job to be done once they're eight or nine.

My girls on a whole do a good job of picking up toys and cleaning their rooms when we ask them, although they can really drag their feet at times. Yet on rare occasions one of them will go the extra mile and surprise me. Without being asked, Savannah for example, will take it upon herself to clean up the basement or clean up her room. When that happens, I will usually try to reward her in some special way, like taking her out for ice cream. Of course what inevitably follows from the other two girls is a jealous protest that their sister gets a special treat while they do not, all the while forgetting that I had shown them a similar kindness in the past when they had gone the extra mile in their chores.

When my girls do that, they illustrate the problem with grace, or perhaps better said: they illustrate *our* problem with grace. We all love the idea of grace when it comes to us: we like to receive some benefit we don't deserve, like being taken out for ice cream or not getting the speeding ticket you know you deserve or being told you don't need to pay for a car repair or a medical bill that you couldn't afford. But the problem comes when grace is extended to others. We don't particularly like it when someone gets off the hook for something they did wrong. We're annoyed when people "get away with murder" as we say, like when judge grants leniency to a criminal. It bothers us when folks are given a free pass while we have to pay. Grace can be a very welcomed thing when we are the recipients but it too easily becomes a troubling thing when grace is given to someone else.

That's precisely the situation described in Jonah chapter 4. Jonah loves the grace of God when he's the object of that grace. It makes him ever so happy! But that grace becomes a troubling grace when it is given to those whom Jonah deems unworthy of it. Suddenly what was a cause for joy when he was the recipient of grace becomes a source of anger when given to others. It was perfectly fine for God to save him in spite of his sin, but should God dare to grant that same grace to the people of Nineveh – well, that's going way too far in Jonah's mind. God's good grace toward him became a deeply troubling grace when it was extended to his hated enemies.

So as we look at this final chapter in Jonah this morning, let me sum for you the main idea of what I think God would have us learn about his grace, which is just this:

Main idea: God's grace reveals his great love and our great sin.

As we will shortly see, the grace of God tells us a great deal about God's great love for the lost and yet also shows us the jealousy and anger that often resides in our hearts. So let's walk through this last chapter of Jonah as see how this plays itself out. We'll begin with our first point, which is...

1. Jonah's thoughts on God's grace to others

Let's see how Jonah reacts to God's grace toward the Ninevites by opening your Bibles with me to Jonah 4, which can be found on page 655 on the pew Bibles in front of you. I will begin reading in 3:10 and go through 4:1. **"When God saw what the [Ninevites] did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and did not do it. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry."**

As we learned about last week, something astonishing happens in the city of Nineveh as a result of Jonah's preaching. The entire city, from the peasant farmer all the way up to the king, repents of their sin. Even though Jonah's message was one of doom, proclaiming that the city would be overthrown in forty days, nevertheless the people respond by wearing sackcloth, fasting, and calling out to Yahweh in prayer. As a result, God responds by relenting from destroying them.

You would think Jonah would be overjoyed by this. Here was the grace of God being shown to over one hundred thousand people who were spared certain destruction all as a direct result of Jonah's preaching. This is the greatest revival ever and Jonah was the man God used to bring it about. You would think Jonah would be on cloud nine!

Instead, what does it say in v. 1? **"But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry"** or if you want to be more literal, it the Hebrew reads "It was evil to Jonah with great evil and he became angry." Jonah considered the salvation of the Ninevites not a good thing to rejoice over but rather an **"evil."** This was the worst thing that could have happened in Jonah's mind. So Jonah gets angry. He's totally furious at God. How dare God go and have mercy on the Assyrians!

At least this time when Jonah has a beef with God, he doesn't try to flee: he's at least learned that lesson. This time he goes directly to God in prayer. Listen to what he says in v. 2-3. **And [Jonah] prayed to the LORD and said, 'O LORD, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.'**"

In other words, Jonah says, "God, I told you so!" The whole reason Jonah fled was because he had the hinting suspicious that if he were to go to Nineveh, something like this would happen. Jonah knows how God is. He recites a commonly used formula used to praise God throughout the Old Testament, and turns it into a complaint. "I knew

it! I knew you were a gracious and merciful God, that you are oh-so-slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and that you'd probably relent from bringing disaster on the wicked and sure enough, I was right! It's just like you to have mercy on sinners and of all the people for you to be merciful to, you do it to the Ninevites through me! Ugh! I'm so angry with you for being gracious and merciful that I would just rather you kill me on the spot than to go on living knowing you spared the city of Nineveh from destruction!"

This has to be one of the most astonishing prayers ever said, both for its boldness and utter foolishness. You will be hard pressed to find a more contemptuous prayer in all of Scripture. After a prayer like that, it's not hard to imagine what the next verse is going to be? "And the Lord God smote Jonah for his arrogance and wiped him off the face of the earth. The end." There is no way somebody should be able to speak to God like that and get away with it. But how does God answer Jonah instead? Look at v. 4 with me. **And the LORD said, 'Do you do well to be angry?'**" or as the NIV translates it, **"Do you have any right to be angry?"**

I'm not sure what's more incredible: the fact that Jonah is angry or that God is not. Amazingly, God doesn't give Jonah what he deserves; instead, he challenges Jonah by asking a probing question: "Should you be angry about this?" In light of the context, v. 4 may be one of the greatest examples of grace in all of Scripture. God doesn't strike Jonah down; rather he offers Jonah a chance to calm down and think things through.

It reminds me of God's gentle, probing words to another very angry man named Cain. Back in Genesis 4, Cain is angry at God for not accepting his offering, when God asks him a similar question about his anger, "Are you really justified in your anger towards God? Is not the real problem in your own heart and not in God's gracious acceptance of others? Maybe you need to think things through a little more carefully." Jonah is being asked to do some self-examination, just like Cain was asked to do long ago.

Perhaps some of you here this morning are a lot like Jonah: you're angry at God. Maybe you don't particularly like the way God's grace has been distributed. There are people you're aware of who seem to have everything going for them while you feel like you've gotten the short end of the stick. You know of people who have been blessed with great health year after year while you on the other hand go on suffering with the same debilitating illness. You see families happily playing with children at the park while you languish waiting for a spouse or discovering that once again the pregnancy test came back negative. You hear of couples celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary while you once again come return to an empty house with only photos left to remember your spouse by. You see folks buying the new cars and taking lavish vacations while you struggle through another month of trying to just pay the utility bills. And slowly jealousy toward them and anger towards God grows within your heart.

The truth is God's grace can be troubling when we compare ourselves to others. We ask ourselves, "Why do they get it so easy and I have it so hard?" God doesn't seem fair. So we get angry at God. We become mad that God should dare grant some one more grace than me! "Why should someone like that have a long marriage and plenty of kids and good health while God withholds those blessings from me?"

Have you guys ever asked those questions? Have you ever been angry at God for how you felt you've received the short end of the stick of God's grace? Maybe some of you are there right now. You're angry with God for how your life is in comparison to others, maybe even so angry that you've prayed, "God I am so angry at you that I just want to die!" Then God's question to Jonah is also his question to you: **"Have you any right to be angry?"** God would have you slow down, take a deep breath and think it through.

If we think about it, we have no right to be angry about God's grace since none of us deserve it. We all deserve death and hell for our sins: anything short of that is grace. And since we do not deserve any of it, we have no right to complain when God chooses to give grace more liberally to people other than ourselves. Jesus himself spoke about this in a parable about day-laborers in a vineyard in Matthew 20. When those who worked all day complained they were getting the say pay as those who worked only the last hour, the owner replied, *"Take what belongs to you and go. I choose to give to this last worker as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or do you begrudge my generosity?"*

Begrudging God's generosity is what Jonah did and what we do when we get angry at God for showing grace to others. We have no claim to make on God's grace, so we have no right to be angry about how little or much he gives to us or others. God is God and he is free to choose to whom he extends grace to and to what extent he extends it. What we should be is thankful for the grace we have received, regardless of how God's grace has been given to others.

Sadly, Jonah still doesn't grasp this, even after God asks him this question. So God uses an object lesson in order the help drive his point home. Let's see what that is by turning our attention to the second point of the sermon, which is...

2. Jonah's thoughts on God's grace to himself

Look back in your Bibles at v. 5. **"Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city."**

Jonah doesn't answer God's question and instead pitches camp far outside the city and waits to see what will happen. Perhaps Jonah hopes that God will yet change his mind and hurl down fire and brimstone upon Nineveh. Maybe he thinks he's convinced God that he's right to be angry or that the Ninevites will turn back to their evil ways once he leaves the city. So he waits, hoping that maybe, just maybe at the end of the forty days God will strike them all down and he'll be watching it with a front-row seat.

But God isn't through with Jonah yet. Look in your Bible at what happens next in v. 6. **"Now the LORD God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant."**

God provides Jonah a plant that provides him much-needed shade, since the average day temperature in this area is about 110 degrees. In response to this, we're told that Jonah literally "rejoiced over the vine with great rejoicing." He wasn't just happy about the vine; he was deliriously happy (Smith 278). We're never told that Jonah is happy about being rescued at sea and we certainly know he wasn't happy about the revival in Nineveh, but he's just giddy about this plant. It's almost comical if it wasn't so sad. Yet how many times do we get more excited by our favorite sports team winning a game than by news of people coming to Christ? How often do we take more pleasure in a new trinket we purchase at the store than over the knowledge that God has saved us from our sins? Once again, we're not so different from Jonah in many ways.

So why is Jonah dancing his little happy jig over this plant? First, I imagine he's happy for any relief from the scorching sun but secondly, he may just look at this plant as an indication of God's favor towards him. In other words, Jonah may be interpreting this as God changing his mind about Nineveh. Obviously to Jonah, since God blessed him with this plant, then certainly that must mean God agrees with Jonah and plans to wipe Nineveh off the map.

Again we need to ask, are we all that different from Jonah? How often do we interpret the good things that happen to us as God's favor? Since God did good thing X for us, then that must mean he is in favor of us doing action Y. Have you ever thought that way? As a pastor, I can assure you that people do this all the time. I would bet you dollars to donuts that's part of why Jonah is so happy here. The only reasonable explanation in Jonah's mind for God to provide this shade for him is so he can have a comfortable place to watch God destroy the city.

Unfortunately for Jonah, God has a very different purpose in providing this plant. Look back at verses 7-8. **But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die saying, 'It's better for me to die than to live.'**"

The Lord gives and the Lord takes away. The plant that provided shade for Jonah one day was suddenly gone the next. Jonah wakes up to discover that the source of his joy the day before had been destroyed by a worm. Then to make matters worse, God sends a scorching wind that whips the desert sand into his eyes and allows the sun to mercilessly beat down on his head. Jonah is utterly miserable. Everything he feared when God first called him to this assignment has come true and worse: in the process he nearly drowned at sea, spent three horrifying days in the dark, cold, acidic belly of a fish, and now was being burnt alive under the oppressive heat of the sun. Then one small source of joy he had has been taken from him and so Jonah has had enough. So in angry despair Jonah cries out, **"It is better for me to die than to live!"**

How often are we like Jonah in this regard? We take great joy in some good thing God gives us by his grace but then we become sullen and angry when that grace is taken away. What is first received as grace quickly becomes something we regard as our right. "Hey God, I deserved that plant, after all I've been through! I did what you

asked me to do; don't I at least deserve some relief since I came all the way out here and preached to their worthless pagans? Yet no sooner than I'm able to enjoy the shade, it gets eaten by a worm! Thanks a lot God!" Do you ever think that way? Do you think that somehow God owes you some grace for how you've served him? Since you did X, Y, and Z for God, now God owes you a long and healthy life with plenty of creature comforts and if you don't get that, then you're going to cross your arm and tell God, "It's better for me to die than go on living!"

I know I've felt that way before. Before I came here, I had spent more time looking for a job than having one. I spent many years going to Bible college and seminary and I expected that after doing all that studying, God owed me a job, right? I had done what he asked so once I graduated, I should be hired fairly quickly as a pastor. Instead, my first job search dragged on for two years, and then I spent the next two years serving in a very difficult situation at a church in Missouri, only to find myself doing the job search once again, this time for a year and a half. So during the first five and a half years after I graduated, I spent three and a half of those years looking for a job.

So I understand Jonah a bit. There were times I would just rather die than have to fill out another church questionnaire or get the e-mail saying, "While we appreciate your gifts and talents, we believe God is leading us to pursue someone else." God wasn't keeping his end of the bargain as far as I was concerned. I had done my part: God owed me. Perhaps some of you find yourself thinking the same way. God owes you a certain degree of grace in light of what you've done for him. And when he fails to give you what you expect, you become angry and feel like you just want to die.

Just like as he did earlier in the chapter, God once again invites Jonah to consider whether he's right to feel this way. Look at v. 9. **"But God said to Jonah, 'Do you do well to be angry for the plant?' And he said, 'Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die.'"** Last time Jonah didn't answer God but this time Jonah is quick to reply. "Yeah God, I'm absolutely right to be angry. Final answer." Jonah isn't in the mood for reflection. His mind is made up and that's that.

Once again, Jonah is at a crisis point. God could very well give Jonah what he wants and strike him down on the spot. It would certainly be what Jonah deserves. But as God has consistently done throughout this book, he gives Jonah the grace he needs rather than what he wants. Since Jonah is too thick-skulled and stubborn to figure out what God is trying to teach him of his own, God lays it out for him in the last two verses of the book. Let's look at those together as we consider our third and final point of the message this morning, which is...

3. God's thoughts on His grace to everyone

Follow along as I read verse 10-11. **"And the LORD said, 'You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?'"**

The Lord helps Jonah's thinking along by arguing from the lesser to the greater. He asks Jonah to think about his response to the plant. Jonah was seven levels of happy about that plant. In fact, God says Jonah cared about the plant. The ESV translates the Hebrew here as "**pity**" while others versions translate it as "**have compassion**" or "**be concerned.**" Having found himself sitting out in the hot sun without any shade, this plant was a big deal to Jonah. He didn't want anything to happen to it. He had plans to look after it, to tend it and make sure it lived a long and healthy life. Yet God reminds Jonah that all of his joy and concern was directed towards something he neither planted nor made grow and which came and went within a day's time. The plant really was a pretty fleeting thing. Jonah's investment in that plant was extremely minimal, yet Jonah cared about it.

So then, if Jonah cared so much about a simple plant, shouldn't God have an even greater concern for the people of Nineveh? Jonah's upset about a single plant which he did nothing to get and lasted only one day; how much greater is 120,000 people created in the image of God who have lived many years! God made those people in Nineveh. He knitted their bodies in their mother's wombs. He created the cattle and other animals in the city. Shouldn't God be far, far more concerned about people he lovingly created than Jonah was about a plant that suddenly appeared?

God was trying to teach Jonah and those of us like him a lesson about his grace. God is gracious and compassion to all people, both to the violently wicked like the Assyrians and to the rebelliously foolish like Jonah. God's grace is given to Jews and Gentiles, to the rich and the poor, to the powerful and the powerless, to the prodigal son who sins by his immoral living and to his older brother who sins in his moralistic self-righteousness. All are in need of grace and give gives grace generously to all.

The questions we face at the end of the book of Jonah are: "Are you willing to let God be the gracious God that he is to all people, even those who you don't believe deserve it? Are you willing to still worship him even if his grace toward others should seem to exceed far beyond what he has given to you? Can you allow God to be God or are you going to angrily cross your arms and stamp your feet when his grace exceeds whatever artificial boundaries you've erected?" That's what God would have us personally think about as we wrap up our study of Jonah.

We don't want to walk away from our time in the book of Jonah laughing at how he so often foolishly and childishly responded to God, as if he's simply some exaggerated caricature created for us to poke fun of. Jonah is a picture of the sinful heart that exists in each of us, one that runs from obeying God's Word and is easily angry, jealous and troubled by his grace towards others. We're no better than Jonah if we walk away from the questions God is asking us without reflecting carefully on our own hearts. In fact, we might even be worse, and here's why.

While the book of Jonah ends abruptly without the author ever telling us how Jonah responds to God's questions, we know what his response is simply by the fact that we have this book. There are only two options left for Jonah: either he refuses to accept the unrelenting nature of God's grace towards sinners and dies in his stubbornness

under the blazing sun, or he humbles himself, returns home, and writes this book for the sake of those who follow after him. The only person who can tell us this story is Jonah himself, so by reading it, it means Jonah did change in the end. He did learn to accept the nature of God's grace. Though it took some serious work for God to get it through Jonah's thick skull, he finally is liberated from his self-centered angry and is willing to allow God to be the gracious and merciful God he is.

Conclusion

So as we close, I want to encourage you to be like Jonah – not in terms of his sin (I'm sure many of us are like that already!) – but in terms of his response. Let's God's Word penetrate your hearts and cause you to examine where you have been like Jonah. Are you running from God or willingly obeying him, no matter how difficult the task? Are you angry at God for his grace towards other or can you accept that God gives generously to all, in whatever manner he deems fit? Can you let God be God and accept his grace given to all people, even to those whom you don't think deserve it? Jonah learned the lesson God wanted to teach him and then told went and told others about his encounter with the relentless grace of God. Are you willing to do the same? Let's pray.

Prayer

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Brethren Church of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2010.