

**Message from the Master**, Broadcast Date: **July 8, 2007**

**Sermon Series:** Ancient Messengers, Modern Message

**This Sermon:** The Lord's Mercy Is For All (The Prophet Jonah)

**Speaker:** Forrest Bivens

G. Campbell Morgan, referring to the book of Jonah, once said: "Men have been looking so hard at the great fish that they have failed to see the great God". The book of Jonah purposefully uses the word "great" several times to catch and keep our attention. Several times the city of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, is called a "great city". Jonah the prophet is told by the Lord, "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it." But, as we know very well, Jonah did not want to do that and took off in the opposite direction. Then we are told that the Lord "sent a great wind" to create a "great storm" on the sea while Jonah was onboard a ship trying to get away from God. And then we are told how the Lord provided a "great fish" to swallow Jonah after he had been thrown into the sea. And after the great wind and the great storm subsided, and after the great fish had vomited Jonah back on dry land, we remember how the prophet finally went to preach to the great city of Nineveh. So it is not a bad summary of the book of Jonah to say it was about great things used by God to do great things. But the greatest thing of all is not to be found in the city, the wind, the storm, or the fish that swallowed Jonah. No, the greatest thing by far is the great God whose great mercy for Jonah and the people of Nineveh, is at the center of everything else we are told about in this book.

This morning, as we continue our sermon series on Old Testament prophets and the remarkably modern messages that these ancient messengers share with us, our specific attention is on the book of Jonah. And the message that is at the heart of this book is this: ***God's Mercy is for All***. This morning let's take the time to remind ourselves that ***God's great mercy is directed toward two kinds of people in this world: those currently outside the church – and those currently inside the church.***

It is obvious that God wanted to show mercy to people who were religious outsiders when he told Jonah to go and preach his Word to the people of Nineveh. They were Assyrians, not Israelites. As a city and a nation, the Assyrians were known much more for cruelty than for kindness. They worshiped idols, false gods rather than the true God. Their culture, their language, and their religion were different from that of Jonah and the people of Israel. They were definitely outsiders. In Ephesians chapter 4 the apostle Paul referred to "Gentiles" or non-Jews who were filled with "futility in their thinking . . . darkened in their understanding, and separated from the life with God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts." Wow, what a bleak and horrible portrait of lost people! And a prime example of this kind of people in the Old Testament was the city of Nineveh. What hopeless people!

And that is probably the way we feel quite often when we think about certain people or kinds of people that we not like at all. Maybe we think it is hopeless for them. An alcoholic parent whose bad behavior and example for the children continues year after year . . . an abusive spouse who bludgeons the marriage partner physically, or verbally, or emotionally without any sign of remorse . . . the children of bad or inept parents who terrorize the neighborhood . . . that deranged or at least unstable neighbor who spreads anything but brightness and sunshine wherever he goes . . . that co-worker is always trying to make you look bad and often succeeds. When it comes down to it, we despise them and often consider them hopeless as well as undeserving of divine mercy. Let them perish, the sooner the better – or if they are to be saved, let it happen without my having an active role in the process.

But that is not at all what God had in mind for Nineveh. Rather, words like compassion, mercy, and pity are used to describe how God felt toward these religious misfits and outsiders. He loved them when they did not love him. His desire was to bring them to repentance because of their sins, not to roast them in hell for their sins. From start to finish, this message comes through loud and clear in the book of Jonah and in the entire book known as the Bible. "God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son" is what the Bible affirms as truth. "God does not want *anyone* to perish but desires *everyone* to come to repentance" is what the apostle Peter echoes as divine truth. "God wants *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" is what the apostle Paul wrote as unchanging truth. While all people deserve to be condemned by God for disobedience and unbelief, God's mercy is still directed at them. If they are eventually lost and forfeit forgiveness and heaven, it will not be because God's mercy or Christ's saving work was not directed toward them. And the book of Jonah is a good reminder that this is so. Let us never forget this, even – or especially – when those outside the church get on our nerves or show themselves as enemies of God and of God's people in ways that disappoint or anger us.

When an atheist named Robert Ingersoll was delivering a lecture against Christ and the Bible, he once dramatically took out his watch and said, "I'll give God a chance to prove that he exists and is almighty. I challenge him to strike me dead within 5 minutes!" At the end of the allotted time, the atheist exclaimed derisively, "See! There is no God. I am still very much alive!" After the lecture a young fellow said to a Christian lady, "Well, the speaker certainly proved something tonight!" Her reply was memorable. "Yes he did," she said. "He proved God isn't taking orders from atheists tonight." There has never been a shortage of people who pick fights with God and show themselves unworthy of divine love in dramatic ways. But the mercy of God is greater than their mockery. Jonah reminds of that ancient and modern message: God's mercy is for all, including those currently outside the church.

But what about Jonah himself, the reluctant prophet and card-carrying member of the Old Testament church? Isn't it equally true that God's mercy is directed at those within the church as well as those outside of it? Yes, that is very true – and people like you and me should give special attention to this grand truth. Are we members of Christ's church, part of the family of believers? Do we find it unthinkable that we should be grouped with those outside the church and who disdain for God is out in the open for all to see? If so, the book of Jonah and its emphasis on God's great mercy is definitely written for us. We not only used to be – but still are – as unworthy of God's mercy and kindness in Christ than were the people of Nineveh or the pagans of Ephesus or the atheists of America.

To illustrate this point, listen to the testimony of a man named Ken Langley and his wife who wrote these words after a flight in an airplane. After worrying for half an hour that they wouldn't get on an overbooked flight, Mr. and Mrs. Langley were summoned to the check-in desk. A smiling agent whispered that this was their lucky day. To get them on the plane he was bumping them up to first class. This was the first and only time they had been so pampered on an airplane—good food, hot coffee, plenty of elbowroom. During the flight they began to play a little game, trying to guess who else didn't belong in first class. One man stuck out. He padded around the cabin in his socks, restlessly sampling magazines, playing with but never actually using the in-flight phones. Twice he sneezed so loudly they thought the oxygen masks would drop down. And when the attendant brought linen tablecloths for their breakfast trays, he tucked his into his collar as a bib. Truly a misfit for first class! Perhaps that was so – but in all honesty, weren't the Langleys just as much "misfits" who received their seats not by earning or paying for them, but by having been given them.

Now stop thinking about that airplane and the first-class section on that flight. Think about the church. Think about your congregation and the people you see there every week. You know, we see misfits all the time in church. There are people who obviously do not belong, perhaps because of the clothes they wear or the color of their skin or the accent they have when talking. There are also people who embarrass us. They seem inferior. They simply are not "our kind of people." But, you know what the real truth is? We do not belong in God's church any more than they do. God mercy for all – specifically for me and for you – that is why we are in the church and continue to be a member of his family of believers. We deserve to be a

believer just as much as Jonah deserved to be a prophet, that is, not at all. God chose him as a believer and as a prophet purely by grace and in mercy. That was true then – and it is true now, in our lives and labors among God’s people.

Sometimes we think or speak or act as though the grace of God were something that we once needed and at one time depended on for our spiritual life, but after our conversion and church membership and our improved behavior become realities, we feel less dependent on God’s love and mercy. Whenever we start to think this way, we need a major attitude adjustment. We remain unworthy sinners who require divine love and power to remain citizens of heaven and servants of our neighbors. As with Jonah, so with us: It is all about God’s mercy for everyone.

One Sunday after church a pastor noticed that one of the members was wearing a lapel pin that had a bulldog on it. He was wearing it because he worked for Mack Truck and the bulldog is their logo, but the pastor didn’t know that. So when he asked, "Why are you wearing a pin of a bulldog?" the member got a twinkle in his eye and said, "Well, that bulldog symbolizes the tenacity with which I hold onto Jesus Christ." The pastor answered, "Well, it’s a great symbol and a good attitude, but it’s lousy theology."

The man asked, "What do you mean?" The pastor said, "It should never stand for the tenacity with which you hold onto Jesus Christ. It should stand for the tenacity with which Jesus Christ holds onto you." The pastor was making an important point. By the grace of God in Christ we are who we are and may remain who we are. Only by God’s love and compassion did Jonah serve as the prophet he was called to be. Only because of God’s great love did someone in the church serve others who were at that time outside the church. That was true then and it is true now.

I hope that you catch the comfort in all of this. Christian writer J. I. Packer once wrote, “There is tremendous relief in knowing that [God’s] love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery can disillusion Him about me . . . and quench His determination to bless me. There is, certainly, great cause for humility in the thought that He sees all the twisted things about me that my fellow-men do not see . . . and that He sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself. There is, however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, He wants me as His friend, and desires to be my friend, and has given His Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose.” (Knowing God, p. 37)

God’s Mercy is for all -- for all currently outside the church and those like us within the church. That is the modern message and timeless truth we learn through the ancient messenger, the prophet Jonah. The same gracious Lord who sought to bring the great city of Nineveh to repentance, who used the great wind to create the great storm that redirected Jonah, and who provided the great fish to return Jonah to his assigned task, remains great in mercy and compassion for us and others. Let us never fail to see this great God above all else in the work of Jesus Christ for us all. Amen.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, Lord of all compassion and mercy, you know our sins and disobedience, our unworthiness to be your people. Deal with us mercifully for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ and his saving work for us. Impress on us the greatness of your love for those currently outside your church and lead us to seek their conversion to Christ. Use our hearts and voices, gifts and efforts for this great purpose. In Jesus’ name we also join to pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.