

Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. ⁶ Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. ⁸ When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

"I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die."

¹⁰ But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. ¹¹ But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:5-11)

Who Needs God's Mercy?

Did you ever play the game of mercy? We used to play it when I was a kid. Two people grab each other's hands and squeeze until one of them cries, "Mercy!" You cry "Mercy!" because it hurts. I always hated that game because God gave me small, girl-sized hands and the other guy's hands were always bigger and stronger. In that game, who gives the mercy? Obviously, it's the stronger person. Who asks for it? Again, obviously, it's the weaker person. That game is at best an imperfect representation of God's relationship with us, because the game is cruel. God is not cruel. But the one-sided nature of mercy, the one-sided balance of power, that does represent a truth about our relationship with God. **Who needs God's mercy?**

I.

The Old Testament prophet Jonah illustrates the answer. This is the Jonah and the whale guy, although the Bible actually never says it was a whale. It says that God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah. But that is one of the most famous incidents in the Bible. The incident before us this morning happened afterward. After Jonah ran away and was swallowed, after he spent three days in the belly of the fish, after he was vomited out and completed his mission, this is what happened. That mission is what this book is about. More precisely, the love of God that sent Jonah on that mission is what this book is about. The book of Jonah shows us God's mercy in a rich and powerful way. **Who needs that mercy? All those who are lost in darkness.**

That was the spiritual condition of Nineveh. Nineveh was one of the cities that served as a capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians have gone down in history as brutal conquerors. They would do horrible things to people they conquered to terrify other people into giving them what they wanted. They were Israel's enemies. A little over a hundred years after God sent Jonah to Nineveh, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern kingdom of Israel. They dragged the people away and those northern tribes never returned.

God said about them, "**But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?**" 120,000 people doesn't seem like that big of a deal to us today. But in the ancient world, that was huge. And it was a city that didn't know its right hand from its left. What does that mean? God was not saying that these people were stupid. God was speaking spiritually. They were clueless when it came to right and wrong. They knew nothing of spiritual matters.

God was concerned about them. The Hebrew really says something much stronger. God asked, "Should I not show mercy to that great city?" Did Nineveh deserve God's mercy? Her enemies would've said no. They had never shown any mercy to their enemies. They deserved whatever judgment God chose to inflict on them. God is a God of justice. If these people appeared before his judgment throne without repentance and faith, they would most certainly go to hell. But God is a God of mercy before all else. So he sent Jonah to Nineveh to call this great city of sin and this people that excelled in cruelty to repentance and life.

God loved the Assyrians. And that shows us that he loves all people. He loves people that we don't particularly care for. He loves people who don't love him. All over the world there are people who don't know the true God, who don't repent of their sins and trust in Jesus as their Savior. There are hundreds of millions of

people all over the world who worship false gods and even condemn the God of the Bible as a lie. God loves all those people.

God has mercy on them all. He sent his Son Jesus to pay for all of their sins. Jesus didn't just come for you and me. He didn't die just for Lutherans or for Americans. He didn't just die for Christians. Jesus suffered hell itself on the cross and he died for every person who will ever live. He died for the Assyrians and he died for all those people around the world who hate him. He died for people here in Livonia and Westland who don't yet have faith in him. And he died for people thousands of miles from here who practice religions that condemn our faith. Just as you and I can go to bed each night knowing that we are paid for because Jesus paid for everyone, God wants those people to know that, too.

So Jesus sends us out to share the gospel so those people can have faith in him. If Jesus died for everyone and all sin is paid for, why do you need faith? Faith is relying on Jesus instead of on ourselves. Many of you have heard me say this before, but it's the best way I can think of to illustrate it. Imagine I opened a checking account in your name and I put \$10,000 into that account. Now, if you believed me – if you trusted me – you could use that money. You could depend on it for your house payment or your car payment. But if you didn't know about it, or if you didn't believe me, would the money still be there? Of course it would. But you wouldn't get any benefit from it. Your house could be repossessed when all the time the money to get caught up on your payments was there.

God has given the life and death and resurrection of Jesus to every human being who will ever live. Because he loves us, God has sent the Christian Church into the world to let people know what they already have. And God didn't rely on our willingness or our cleverness or our sincerity to give anybody that faith. He doesn't depend on me or on you to convince even one person. God put his power in his word. God put his anger over sin into his law so that we fear death and hell. And God put his love into the announcement that Jesus died for us. Through that good news, God reaches into the hearts of those who hear and he gives faith and life.

II.

Jonah was the first foreign missionary that we know of in history. God gave him enormous success. The king of Nineveh commanded his people to repent in sackcloth and ashes. They humbled themselves before God and begged him not to destroy them. Wouldn't you think that all that success would make Jonah happy? But it didn't. Given one of the most successful ministries ever recorded, Jonah pouted and got angry. God lets us see the man as he really was so that we understand the answer to our question this morning. **Who needs God's mercy? All of us, God's imperfect servants.**

Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh. He didn't like the Assyrians. That's why he ran away and got swallowed. Now, Jonah's unwillingness does not mean he was an unbeliever. Quite the opposite, when he was in the belly of the fish, he prayed a beautiful and humble prayer for God's deliverance. Jonah's faith provided part of the reason he didn't want to go: he knew God would have mercy if the people of Nineveh repented. Jonah didn't want them to repent. He didn't want them to be spared. That does show the sin that lurked in his heart. After the city repented, Jonah stomped out of town to wait and see what would happen. He built a shelter for himself and sat like a spoiled child who wanted to see his brother or sister get punished and who still hopes they might.

How should God have dealt with this poor excuse for a spokesman? When my children pout and stomp around, I have very little patience. They can tell you what response that kind of behavior gets. But that's not how God dealt with Jonah. Instead God had a vine grow up over his shelter. The shelter faced east, so the sun shone directly into it. I imagine the vine was just in front of the shelter and it blocked the sun as it rose. As a child, I didn't really understand how much of a difference that could make. But if you go to Greenfield Village, there's a house there that was brought up from the south. Right outside, they've built an arbor, with grape vines across the top. The leaves and the vines create shade. When you step under it on a hot day, it feels wonderful.

Jonah was very happy about that vine. But then God sent a worm to kill it. God sent a hot east wind off the desert and caused the sun to blaze down directly into his crude shelter and Jonah started to suffer a little heat exhaustion. He felt faint. And he got so angry that he wished he could die. What was Jonah's problem? The problem that every sinner has: pride. Jonah was an egotist. He wanted God to wipe out the city of Nineveh, but when he was uncomfortable, he was so mad he wanted to die. God asked him if this attitude was right. Again, like a spoiled child, Jonah said that it was. That's when God pointed out all that was wrong with his attitude.

He didn't plant or tend that vine. It just grew wild and died. He cared more about it than he cared about a whole city of people. God was telling Jonah he needed to get his priorities straight.

Then the book ends. Do you think that Jonah repented? I think he did and I'll tell you why. Jonah probably wrote this book. The very last words are God's rebuke against his pride and sin. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he let God have the last word. I think that shows a repentant heart.

We all wrestle with Jonah's problem: pride and egotism. We're so concerned about ourselves and our problems that we ignore the greater issues. We want everything to go right for us. But do we put our feelings on hold to live as God wants us to? When we're stuck in traffic or when someone does something rude on the highway, how do we respond? Do we pound on the steering wheel and curse and swear? Are we so caught up in ourselves that that extra second provokes that kind of sin? What about supporting the preaching of the gospel that God has entrusted us with? You know we cut \$50,000 out of our church's budget this year. If we just keep our giving at last year's levels, we should be within sight of financial solvency by the end of the fiscal year. But do we put the gospel ahead of our pleasure, ahead of our cable TV and our expensive toys and our dinners out? Or do we just give God the leftovers?

What about the time we spend for the Lord? There are so many ways that we can serve. There are positions in the church that we need to fill. And there are those day-to-day opportunities to give a good confession of Christ. How often do we put God and his love for the people around us first? How often do we avoid serving our congregation because we don't want to come to meetings or spend time here on our days off? How often do we avoid conversations about spiritual things because we might be uncomfortable? How often does our selfishness interfere?

My friends, who needs God's mercy? Every single one of us because we're all sinners. If you think that I'm standing up here thinking I'm better than you are, you've missed the point. I wrestle with just as much pride and sinful weakness as you do. It is so easy for us to make everything about us, about me and what I want. That is the essence of our sin. That pride and sin deserves death and hell.

But my friends, God has had mercy on us. God sent Jesus to be the perfect servant that you and I can never be. Jesus always rejoiced to serve. God counts that perfect service of Jesus as ours. He says that we did all the things that Jesus did. And because Jesus suffered hell and died in our place, God says that we have died. God says that we have suffered hell. God says that we have paid our debt and all our sin is gone. Not because we really did all that, but because in his mercy, the Father sent the Son to do it for us. In his mercy, the Son took our place and won forgiveness and life for every human being and that does, most definitely, include you and me. In his mercy, the Holy Spirit worked through the church and made sure that someone brought that gospel to us – in our baptisms as babies, in Sunday school and church and our day school, in that person who first shared Jesus with you and brought you to church. In his mercy, the Holy Spirit reached into our hearts through that gospel and he gave us faith in Jesus.

Now we have eternal life. We are free even from our failures as Christians. Today, God calls us to rejoice in his forgiveness. And he calls to put him first in our lives personally, in our support and our participation in his ministry, in our love for him. God has had mercy on us, and he will work through his gospel to enable us to live as his servants. Amen.