Rock Valley Bible Church (www.rvbc.cc)

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Jonah Hates Mercy

Jonah 4

1. Angry at God (verses 1-3)
2. Answering to God (verses 4-11)

Less than a month ago, a famous radio broadcaster died (February 28, 2009). His name was Paul Harvey. He was ninety years old. For more than 50 years, on more than 1,000 radio stations, Paul Harvey's voice could be heard throughout America. [1]He is best known (at least to me) for his five minute spot entitled, "The Rest of the Story," in which he told of a factual story that always ended with a "twist" saved until the end. For instance, he once told of the 13-year-old boy, who received a cash gift from Franklin Roosevelt. Only at the end of the spot did you find out that the boy who received the gift was Fidel Castro. [2] This morning, in our exposition of the book of Jonah, we will hear "the rest of the story."

In Jonah, chapter 1, we saw how God had called Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh, the wicked Assyrian city. Rather than obeying God and traveling east to Nineveh to preach to them, Jonah went west, far west, to the remotest part of the known world. But, God pursued Jonah, casting a storm upon the sea, so as to cut Jonah's trip short. After a bit of discussion with the captain and sailors on the ship, Jonah confessed that he was the reason for the storm and requested that they toss him overboard, which the men reluctantly did. Instantly, the sea stopped its raging. The sailors on the ship worshiped God.

In chapter 2, we saw Jonah in the stomach of a great fish. The fish was God's agent of mercy upon his life. It saved him from drowning. Jonah knew full well that the LORD had saved him. His words in chapter 2 are a prayer of thanks to the LORD for saving him. Jonah's experience in the fish turned his life around. When the call of God comes to Jonah the second time, he obeys and travels to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD.

In chapter 3, we see Jonah preaching to the Ninevites, "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown." Amazingly, the entire city of Nineveh repents at his preaching. From the king on the throne to the lowest servant in the land. They fasted and put on sack cloth "from the greatest to the least of them" (verse 5). I pointed out last week how amazing their repentance was. They received a half-message from a half-hearted prophet with no promises at all of deliverance from a God who they barely know, and yet, they still repented the first time they heard the message. We read of God's response in chapter 3, verse 10, "When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do it" (3:10).

The story of Jonah could well end there, and it would be a great story! In this case, we would always think of the reluctant prophet, who turned from his sin and preached to the wicked city! We would always think of how wonderful it was that the city repented and lived for God the rest of their days and how they and Jonah lived happily ever after! In fact, this is how the story sometimes ends (at least in some children's book). One children's book entitled, "Obedience: Jonah and the Big Fish," ends with these words ...

> Jonah finally went to Nineveh as God had said. "God wants you to obey Him, or you will be punished," Jonah cried. The people of Nineveh were sorry for their sins. God was glad that they listened to His message. He did not punish them. "Why isn't God punishing them?" complained Jonah. "I came all this way for nothing. Now I look silly to everyone." Jonah did not really care about what God wanted. Jonah was just afraid of what other people might think of him.

So far so good. But, then, comes the conclusion of this story, ...

> Jonah learned to love the people of Nineveh. God forgave those people, because he loved them so much. God wanted Jonah to obey Him, and He wants us to obey Him, too. Obeying God makes us happy, because God always knows what's best for us.

The picture we get here is a big happy family! Jonah learns to love the people of Nineveh. They love Jonah! All is bliss! But, let's hear the rest of the story from Jonah chapter 4. We pick up the words right after God had relented and withdrew His promise of destruction upon the people.

Jonah 4:1-11
But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry. 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. Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life."

The LORD said, "Do you have good reason to be angry?"

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. 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. But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. 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."

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."

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. 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?"

Now, unfortunately, the story leaves us hanging. It ends with a question for Jonah, "Should I not have compassion?" Of course, the answer is yes. But, this question penetrates deeper to Jonah. Should he not have compassion on the Ninevites as well? Of course he should, if he shares the heart of God. As we shall see, this question applies to us as well. Should we not have compassion upon those headed for destruction?

My outline this morning has two points, the first is found in verses 1-4, ...

1. Angry at God (verses 1-3).

This is Jonah. He is angry at God. You can see it there in there in the first verse, "But it greatly displeased Jonah and he became angry." Literally, Jonah was "hot." We're not talking here about a man who was a bit disappointed. We're not talking about a guy who mildly displeased. No, we're talking about a man who was red in the face, steaming, boiling over, in a rage sort of mad! "God, how could you do this to these people!!! They are wicked scoundrels, who deserve your wrath!!! They are rapists and killers!!! They are immoral and idolaters!!! I can't believe that you haven't rained down your wrath upon them! I can't believe that you are letting them off the hook!!! I can't believe that you let them go!!! This is soooo not right!!!" This is what Jonah was! He was an out of control. You say, "Why was he angry?" Jonah explains why in verse 2,

> "[Jonah] 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.'"

Bottom line: Jonah was angry, because God was merciful! He was angry because God had been merciful to Nineveh, an undeserving people. This verse helps us to understand what was taking place in chapter 1. In this verse, Jonah tells us why he didn't go to Nineveh. It wasn't because he didn't want to leave his hometown. Nor was it because he was afraid of the Ninevites. Rather, it was because he knew that God would be merciful to his enemies. Jonah knew that if he would go to Nineveh, that God would forgive them, and not destroy them. And that's the last thing that Jonah wanted.

See, Jonah hated the Ninevites. I can sympathize with his hatred. The Ninevites were the enemies of Israel. In less than 50 years, they would come and wipe out the Israelites. But, the thing that he dreaded most of all was that God would have compassion upon the Ninevites.

So, why was Jonah angry? Because he knew the character of God. He knew that God is a merciful God! He knew this, because he knew his Bible. These words that Jonah uses to describe God are often used of Him in the Old Testament. Consider the following verses from the Psalms:

"You, O LORD, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (Psalm 86:15).
"The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness" (Psalm 103:8).
"The LORD is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in lovingkindness" (Psalm 145:8).

There are other verses in the Old Testament that say the exact same thing (Ps. 111: 4; 112:4; 116:5; Joel 2:13). God is merciful. God is gracious. God is slow to anger. God abounds in lovingkindness. And Jonah knew this well. He had a clear grasp of God's character.

The first time that these words appear in the Old Testament is in Exodus 34. Moses had requested to see God's glory (Ex. 33:18). But God said, "I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you, ... [but] you cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and life!" (Ex. 33:19-20). So, God put Moses in the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33:21).

Exodus 34:6-7
Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.

People say that the Old Testament God is full of wrath. But, when you truly comprehend the God of the Old Testament, you will see that He abounds in lovingkindness for thousands. To be sure, he doesn't leave the guilty unpunished. But, his lovingkindness is abounding. His mercy is great, even, at times to stubborn people.

Moses repeated the words back to God during the wanderings in the wilderness. At one point, Israel had been rebelling against the LORD to such a degree that God threatened to wipe the people out and raise up another nation from Moses. But, Moses fervently prayed to the LORD, telling God that it would bring down His glory as the Egyptians would mock God, for being able to bring the people out of Egypt, but being unable to bring them into the promised land. So Moses prayed,

> Numbers 14:17-19
> Let the power of the Lord be great, just as You have declared, "The LORD is slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression; but He will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations.' Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.

Moses knew full well that the Hebrew people didn't deserve to be forgiven and restored. And yet, God had demonstrated His grace over and over and over again. So, once again, Moses pleads the grace of God. And what happened? God was gracious and merciful to them. Jonah may well have had this story in mind when God initially told him to go to Nineveh. The survival of Israel in the wilderness is a testimony of God's grace to an undeserving people. That's what Jonah knew would happen to Nineveh. Jonah knew that God was going to extend his grace to them. And when God extended it, he wasn't happy at all.

You can see Jonah's displeasure in verse 3, "Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life." Jonah isn't the only man of God who wanted to die. Job's sufferings were enough to bring him to the point of saying, "Would that God were willing to crush me, that He would loose His hand and cut me off!" (Job. 6:9). Moses wanted to die. The people of Israel were complaining to Moses and making huge demands of him that he could never fulfill. He finally reached a point where he said to the LORD, "If You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness" (Num. 11:15).

Elijah was another example of a man of God who wanted to die. Elijah had just seen fit that 850 prophets of Baal were slain near the brook Kishon (1 Kings 18: 40). Now, Jezebel is on the hunt to kill him. We read in 1 Kings 19:4, "[Elijah] went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough; no, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.'"

Jonah wanted to die because of what he knew and experienced from the character of God. Please take note here that correct theology doesn't mean that you have the heart of God. Jonah had the theology down correctly. Jonah knew of God's

gracious character. Jonah knew of God's compassion. Jonah knew that God was slow to anger. Jonah knew that God was abundant in lovingkindness. Jonah knew that God relented concerning calamity. But, Jonah didn't like it. He didn't identify with God's heart. His heart was stony. And how many there are in this world who have all of their theology nice and neat and correct, and yet, they have a heart that's far from God. Many know God's truth very well, but, they lack God's mercy. They are hard. They are demanding. They require others to live up to some standard of living before they will accept them into their fellowship. Oh, they defend themselves well, always having a chapter and a verse to prove their point, but they miss the heart of it all.

The phrase "Bible Bangers" is a derogatory term that is often used to describe these sorts of people. People see them taking their Bible and using it like a club, being hard and condemning, but lacking God's grace. Now, when push comes to shove, they wouldn't say that they lack God's grace. In fact, they might have proof of how kind they are to those in the church. "look at all of the people that I love." In the process, they fail to realize that the alcoholics in the bars may equally say, "I love my friends at the local bar! I'd give the shirt off my back for any of them!"

In pointing out their love toward their friends, they forget that Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. ... For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matt. 5:44, 46-47).

See, here's where the rubber meets the road regarding God's mercy. God extends His mercy to His enemies. This is the glories of the gospel, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom. 5:8-10).

See, the point of the gospel is this: God loved us, even when we were His enemies. God extended His love toward us, even when we were disobedient and rebellious. Do you have the same kind of love? Are there people in your life, who know clearly what you believe about heaven and hell, who also clearly see your love for them? You extend them grace. You extend them kindness. They don't deserve your love and care. But you extend it anyway. Do you love mercy? Or, do you hate mercy?

The religious leaders of Jesus' day hated mercy. If anyone knew what the Scriptures said, they did. But, they missed the heart of God in the Scriptures. This comes up most clearly regarding instances in which Jesus healed people on the Sabbath. Time after time after time again, you see Jesus healing people on the Sabbath. And the Pharisees are angry that Jesus has extended mercy. Here's one instance, ...

> Luke 13:11-14
> [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And there was a woman who for eighteen years had had a sickness caused by a spirit; and she was bent double, and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw here, He called her over and said to her, 'Woman, you are freed from your sickness.' And He laid His hands on her; and immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God. But the synagogue official, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, began saying to the crowd in response, "There are six days in which work should be done; so come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day."

This is typical of the many times throughout the gospel accounts where you see Jesus extending His mercy on the Sabbath, and the people hate it. They hate it, because they hate the mercy of God! How about you? Where's your heart in these matters? Do you love extending mercy? Do you love mercy? Do you love the mercy of God? Jonah hated the mercy of God. So, he was (1) Angry at God (verses 1-3). And now, beginning in verse 4, we have Jonah ...

2. Answering to God (verses 4-11)

"The LORD said, 'Do you have good reason to be angry?'" (verse 4). With these words, God is putting His finger on Jonah's fundamental problem. Jonah has no good reason to be angry. And Jonah knows that he has no good reason to be angry.

I love how gentle God is here with Jonah. The Proverb says, "A gentle answer turns away wrath" (Prov. 15:1). After being on the receiving end of Jonah's tirade, He gently asks, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" It's a bit like God's questioning of Adam in the garden, "Adam, where are you?" (Gen. 3:9). God knew where Adam was. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Gen. 3:11). God knew what

Adam had done. There was really no reason why God should ask, "What is this that you have done?" (Gen. 3:13). But, it was God's way of displaying his mercy to Adam.

In the same way, God extended his mercy to Jonah. God could have reprimanded Jonah, You have no good reason to be angry, young man! So, shape up, right now! Change your attitude!" But, God didn't do that. He asked a simple question, "Do you have good reason to be angry?" IN this way, God was modeling mercy to a hard heart.

Jonah had no answer. Instead, Jonah merely left God's presence. We read, "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" (verse 5). Unlike Nineveh that repented at the preaching of Jonah, Jonah didn't repent at the gentle urging of God.

Rather, he walked out on God's question and posted himself outside of the city. He found a spot someplace where he could watch what God would do to the city. In the heat of season, Jonah built up some type of small structure to protect himself from the sun. Surely, he was doing this in protest. "God, you had promised to destroy these people. Let's see you do it. Are you really going to let them live?"

Obviously, God's gentle question to Jonah didn't help him repent. So, God decides to give him an object lesson. Look at verse 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." God's mercy is all over this verse. Jonah had responded poorly to the repentance of Nineveh. Jonah had responded poorly to God's probing question from God. But, rather than being finished with him, God gives him some earthly comfort. That's mercy!

Jonah didn't deserve this. Jonah deserved to be destroyed in 40 days. Instead, God gave him a plant to help his comfort. We don't really know what sort of plant this is. Some say that it was a gourd (KJV). Some say that it was a vine (NIV). Some identify this as a castor oil plant, which grows rapidly in hot climates, reaches 12 fee tall and has large leaves). I think that the best translation is simply what the New American Standard gives, "a plant." See, in the end, it doesn't really matter. It's much like the fish we looked at in chapter 1. It doesn't really matter what kind of fish. What matters is that God appointed the fish. And in like manner, God appointed the plant.

From verse 10 we know that it grew up quickly, even overnight. It was yet another miracle in the book of Jonah.

God had a two-fold purpose in this plant. First, it was to give shade. Second, it was to deliver Jonah from his discomfort. It accomplished it's purpose very well. For Jonah was "extremely happy about the plant." I can't help but to think of how Jonah could easily have been diagnosed as being "bipolar." In verse 1, he was hopping mad. And now, in verse 6, he's "extremely happy." And, (as we shall see in a bit) in verse 8, he's going to be depressed again, wanting to die again.

His happiness is a testimony to the suitability of this plant. When God does a miracle, he does a good job. When Jesus turned the water into wine, he changed it into good wine. When Jesus fed the multitudes, the all ate and were satisfied. None went away hungry. When Jesus healed, he always healed completely. And so here, the plant that God appointed was a very good plant. It made Jonah extremely happy. But, his happiness doesn't last long.

Look at verses 7 and 8, "But God appointed a worm when dawn came the next day and it attacked the plant and it withered. 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.'" There he goes, wanting to die again. He wanted to die, because God gave him the second part of his object lesson. What God gave, he took away.

God took it away through intervening in the situation. In verse 7, He appointed a tiny worm to do away with the tree. God can use the big fish. And, God can use the tiny worm. In verse 8, we see God again appointing the wind. In chapter 1, it was a great wind upon the cold sea. Here it is a great wind upon the dessert. Those in the dessert call this a sirocco. One commentator said, "During the period of a sirocco the temperature rises steeply, sometimes even climbing during the night, and it remains high, about 16-22F. above average ... ... at times every scrap of moisture seems to have been extracted from the air, so that one has the curious feeling that one's skin has been drawn much tighter than usual. Sirocco days are peculiarly trying to the temper and tend to make even the mildest people irritable and fretful and to snap at one another for apparently no reason at all." [3]

It was getting pretty bad for Jonah. Physically, he was being drained of all his energy in the fever heat of the desert. He snapped at God, saying "Death is better to me than life" (verse 8). And God again asks him yet another question, .. "Do you have good reason to be angry about the plant?" (verse 9). Jonah shot back, "I

have good reason to be angry, even to death." (verse 9). Jonah still doesn't get it. He still wants to die. He wants to die because he hated mercy.

And now comes the big question. It's the question of the book. It's the question of Jonah. "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. 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 argues from the lesser to the greater. First, the plant. "Jonah, you cared for the plant." But, what's the plant? It's one measly plant. It is nothing. It sprang up overnight. It perished overnight. It provided you a day's comfort. If you had your way, this plant would last for the forty days you are outside the city checking out what will happen to Nineveh. Now, let's think about the greater. People are greater than plants. And there are more than 120,000 people in Nineveh. [4]You wanted the plant to live; should I not care for them? You had nothing to do with the plant. But, you still had compassion on it. I created all of the people in Nineveh. Shouldn't I have compassion on them? What about the animals? They are higher than the plants. They eat the plants. Shouldn't I have compassion upon them and let them live?"

And there the book hangs. We don't know "the rest of the story." In the end, we don't know how Jonah ended up answering to God. The answer to this question is obviously, "Yes, God, you should be compassionate." But, we don't know whether or not Jonah ever got to this point. Though the weeks that I have been teaching through Jonah, I have been asked by several people on several occasions, "What do you think happened to Jonah?" We don't know. Some have argued that Jonah couldn't have written the book that he did unless he finally learned his lesson of mercy. But, we simply don't know. The story lets us hang.

There have been times where I have read books to my children and stopped at a suspenseful moment, telling them that it's time to go to bed. They've said, "Read more. Read more." God has done that with us with the book of Jonah. As much as we can cry out, "Read more. Read more." There's nothing else to read! All of our questions about Jonah are unanswered. Does Jonah ever get it? Does Jonah ever repent of his lack of compassion? Does Jonah ever get to the point to share in God's heart for the lost? Does Jonah ever return to the city and love the Ninevites? But, the book never answers these questions, ... and that is the point.

One man wrote, "Like an echo bouncing off canyon walls, it continues to reverberate through the centuries: Should I not be concerned? Should I not be concerned? Should I not be concerned?" What an astounding question! The more I hear it, the less I think about Jonah, and the more I think about myself: Do I share God's heart?" [5]

I want to close my message this morning by looking at a very familiar story. It's the story of the prodigal son. It's found in Luke 15. It is the New Testament parallel to the book of Jonah. I trust that you remember the story. The son had asked his father for half of the inheritance (Luke 15:12). He went away and "squandered his estate with loose living" (Luke 15:13). But, finally, after all of his money was spent, and he was feeding the swine, remembering how good he had it at home, He returned home and sought the forgiveness of his father. Here is what happened, ...

> Luke 15:20-24
> But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."
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> But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.' And they began to celebrate."

That is mercy isn't it? He welcomes the son back, who squandered half of his wealth. His estate value had been cut in half, not by the devaluing of the estate market, but rather by the sinful, wasteful living of his son. In many ways, you can compare this son with Nineveh. And then, along comes the older son, who had happened to be in the field when the older son returned. We might well call him "Jonah," because he hates mercy like Jonah hated mercy. Let's pick up the story, ...

> Luke 15:25-27
> Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound."

At this point, the older son is like Jonah after God had relented concerning the calamity towards Nineveh. When Jonah learned that God had been merciful to Nineveh, he was angry. And so was the older son.

> Luke 15:28-32
> But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, "Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him."
>
> And he said to him, "Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.

Again, we are left hanging. The story of the prodigal son ends just like the book of Jonah. We have no idea of what happened with the older son. Did he eventually repent? Did he come to a place where he loved mercy? We don't know. But, that's the point. Will you love mercy?

The older son responded exactly like Jonah did. When mercy was shown to another, he was angry with his father. Do you realize why? He thought that he had earned a place with his father, being faithful at home for years. And when the father showed mercy, he couldn't handle it. He would rather be out in the field pouting than in the banquet hall celebrating.

You say, "What is it that causes us to despise God's mercy and be angry with God?" Self-righteousness. When the son thinks that he earned his banquet, he will never show mercy to one who receives it by the gracious hand of his father. In fact, the self-righteousness of the Pharisees was the reason why Jesus told the parable of the prodigal son in the first place. It says at the beginning of the chapter, "Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" (Luke 15:1-2).

Jesus was trying to show these men why they are like the prodigal's brother. They don't love mercy. Therefore, they are grumbling at Jesus. They are grumbling at God. And I believe that this is Jonah's problem as well. He is self-righteous,

thinking that the Ninevites don't deserve God's mercy. Jonah was a prophet from the country of Israel. God is our God! We deserve Him. We don't need to share Him. Do you really think that Israel earned their standing before God.

What about you? When a prodigal son comes home, are you rejoicing? When a prodigal comes into the church, are you rejoicing? We are in real danger of being the son at home. We are church folk, who enter into the church every week and love to enjoy God. We can easily begin to think that we deserve God, because we read the Bible and pray every day.

Consider what the Pharisee said, "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12). Whereas the tax collector stood far off, not even feeling worthy to lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, "God be merciful to me, the sinner" (Luke 18:13). Jesus made it clear that the one seeking mercy actually obtained it, whereas the one who was self-righteous did not.

This is why the cross of Christ needs to be central in our lives. The cross reminds us that we don't stand on our own merits before God. Rather, we stand before God only through Christ. When we gaze upon the cross, we see that we are totally undeserving of all of the kindness and grace and mercy that God has given to us. And when we think this way, we will love mercy. When we experience mercy for ourselves, we will extend it to others.

Oh, church family, as we close the book of Jonah I ask, "Do you love mercy?"

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 22, 2009 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

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[1] See http://affiliates.abcradionetworks.com/abcradionetworks/paulharveybio.pdf .

[2] See http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chi-paul-harvey-dead,0,3381755.story.

[3] Dennis Baly, The Geography of the Bible [London: Lutterworth, 1957], pp. 67-68 as quoted by Ellison, in the Expositor's Bible Commentary, p. 387.

[4] Some say that this mention of 120,000 people not knowing the difference between their right and left hands is a reference to children young enough not to be able to know their right from their left. In this case, the number of people in Nineveh may well swell to over a million. Personally, I believe that this reference is easily understood at the total number of Ninevites, who are so hard in their hearts regarding sin and righteousness, that they don't even know what's right and what's wrong. But, in any case, it doesn't really matter too much, as the point is that there are many, many people in Nineveh to whom God has a heart to show His mercy.

[5] Todd Kelly, Concern for the Heart of God: Treasuring What Matters to Him, p. 25.