

“God of Mercy, God of Wrath: Lesson 3”
Jonah 3

October 27, 2013

SI: Last week we began a study of the book of Jonah.
We’re going through it one chapter a week,
and then we are going right into the book of Nahum.
Jonah and Nahum are helpful to study back to back,
because of what they show us about the character of God.

Some have argued that Jonah is the most vivid depiction of God’s mercy
in the Old Testament. It is a marvelous story of grace from beginning to end.
But the book of Nahum is about what happens when the day of mercy is past
and the patience of God comes to an end.

This is our God. He’s the God of amazing grace and tender mercy.
A God who loves and pursues sinners, not willing that any should perish.
At the same time, he’s a God of wrath who will not leave the guilty unpunished..

That’s the Lord our God. Let’s learn and worship.

INTRO: Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons starred together in a movie almost 30 years ago called *The Mission*.

I think it's the best religious movie ever made.

There's a powerful scene midway through the movie that is the turning point in the plot. If you've seen the movie, then you will remember it.

Robert De Niro plays a Spanish slave trader, Rodrigo Mendoza.

It's the 1700s in South America. There is a huge demand for slaves to work the plantations and haciendas of the Spanish and Portuguese colonists.

Rodrigo Mendoza leads his mercenaries into the jungle where they raid unsuspecting Indian villages. They capture men, women, and children, put them in chains, drag them to the city, and sell on the market.

They leave death and destruction in their wake.

They kill everyone who resists, they burn villages.

Rodrigo is feared and hated by these jungle tribes.

After one successful raid he comes back to the city and finds his fiancée in a compromising position with his younger brother. He's furious.

In his hot anger he challenges his brother to a duel and kills him.

There is an inquiry, he's acquitted, but he's plunged into guilt and despair.

Then an old childhood friend comes to see him.

He's a Jesuit missionary named Father Gabriel (who is played by Jeremy Irons).

Father Gabriel has been working in the jungle, gaining the trust of the very tribe that Rodrigo and the slavers have been decimating. He's led many to Christ. And he has started a church, a mission station, in one of the villages.

So he says to Rodrigo, Come with me to my church in the jungle.

But you must take all your armor, your sword, your weapons, wrap them in a big bundle, tie that bundle to a rope around your waist, and then carry that symbol of your violent godless life on this journey.

So they set out, and the movie portrays this very dramatically—

Rodrigo dragging this bundle over mountains, through rain, and rivers.

When they finally reach the Indian village, he's a wreck.

He's filthy, he's in rags, he's unshaven and exhausted.

It's more than just physical, it's symbolic of his emotional and spiritual state.

He's a man broken over his sins. He's finally repentant.

The Indians recognize him—their enemy, the slave trader.

They rush out and surround him, shouting in their language. One of them pulls out a knife and holds it to Rodrigo's throat, but then cuts the rope, cuts him free of burden, and the Indians push it over cliff and into the river. And Rodrigo Mendoza, this once hard man, begins to weep, because he knows that his sins, his many terrible sins, against God and his fellow man have been forgiven, and he has been set free.

It's the turning point of the movie—

from that point on, from the point of his repentance, things are set right. He is right with God, he has a peace and humility before Lord never had.

He's right with his fellow man—he begins to serve and love Indians.

And he's at peace with himself. No longer enslaved to his anger and violence. His life isn't easy or simple.

In fact, in the second half of the movie, he has to make a terrible decision—but he does so as a repentant, forgiven man.

Jonah chapter three is about repentance

and about how God responds to repenting people in grace, mercy, and love.

The Lord gave Jonah a second chance. Commissioned him a second time.

Told him again to go and preach to Nineveh.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. It was the sin center of the world.

The Assyrians were powerful, sadistic people who glorified violence.

They celebrated humiliation and mutilation. Stone carvings in British Museum 3,000 years old depict the Assyrians' love of violence in their fine art.

But when Jonah preached: "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

The Ninevites from the greatest to the least repented.

They turned from evil and violence—and God forgave.

Jonah 3 shows us that God's capacity to forgive is greater than your capacity to sin.

There is no sin or wickedness you commit that the Lord cannot forgive.

And when you repent, he is moved with compassion and delights to forgive.

Repentance is very important. You have to understand it. Have to get it right.

Because repentance is not only necessary for forgiveness—

repentance is also the only way frayed things reconnected, broken things fixed.

I'm talking about all the social and relational maladies caused by our sins,

and the turmoil in our own minds and emotions. Repentance is the only way.

Two headings: 1. Repentance Defined 2. Repentance Practiced

MP#1 Repentance Defined

What is repentance?

What are the changes in your mind and heart, your words and actions that count as repentance in God's sight and move him to compassion and forgiveness?

The book of Jonah helps us understand repentance by contrasting true repentance with false repentance.

I want to give you two theological terms that will help you understand this contrast.

The terms are contrition and attrition.

Theologians call true repentance contrition and false repentance attrition.

The origin of those words is helpful.

Contrition is derived from the Latin word meaning crushed.

Attrition is derived from the Latin word meaning scuffed.

If a piece of furniture is scuffed, maybe a table top for example, it's superficial.

You use furniture polish and buff it out—not fundamentally changed.

But if a piece of furniture is crushed, well that's a different story.

When Allison and I were first married, my parents gave us an antique bookcase.

I was moving it to our apartment in Ft. Lauderdale but it fell out of the trailer on I-95 near Boca Raton and it was smashed by a Lincoln Continental traveling behind me. A Lincoln Continental carrying four New Yorkers.

Then in a matter of minutes all the pieces were crushed into splinters by hundreds of cars and trucks.

Contrition is to have your heart and conscience crushed by sorrow for your sin.

Attrition is to have your heart and conscience only scuffed up a bit.

Attrition can be very painful.

It can manifest itself with tears, weeping, and grief, even suicidal grief.

But the pain of attrition, the scuffing of the heart and conscience, is not because of your sin, it's because of the potential fallout, the consequences.

Imagine the child who is caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar.

He immediately begins to cry and says, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

The sorrow expressed over being in the situation, the embarrassment, spanking.

Attrition is fundamentally a matter of self-preservation.

How can I protect myself? How can I mitigate the consequences?

That's why it frequently involves some measure of blame aimed at others.

Yes, I did wrong, but you did too. Yes, I wronged you, but you mistreated me.

You didn't respect me. You didn't listen to me. You were critical of me.

Contrition, on the other hand, is sorrow for offending God and for offending others. What the other person has done or not done isn't the issue with you.

You don't even bring that up. That's between him and God, her and God.

If you have a contrite heart then you very readily say: I did wrong. I did. Contrition is grief over what I have done rather than what it will cost me.

Now, what do you think about Jonah? Contrition or attrition?

Was Jonah crushed over his sins? Or was he just scuffed by consequences?

We examined his prayer last week, his prayer from inside fish.

We noted that he expressed some very profound truths.

He sounded like a good Presbyterian, all his talk about the sovereignty of God.

Salvation is from the Lord. The man sounds like a Calvinist.

Jonah was very thankful that his life had been spared.

He made promises to offer God sacrifices and fulfill vows.

But the crucial missing element in his prayer was repentance.

There was none of the language of the penitential Psalms.

He never said: Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in sight.

He never said: Then I acknowledged my sin and did not cover up my iniquity.

He didn't say Lord, forgive me for running from you, for being angry at you.

Forgive me for my idolatry of comfort and security.

Forgive me for hating the Ninevites and not loving the Gospel.

If you had asked Jonah if he had repented, he might have said yes.

Yes, I've repented because this time I'm obeying God, going to Nineveh.

I'm doing the right thing. And he did go when God told him to the second time.

But it was a matter of external obedience, not a change from the inside out.

It was an act of self-protection. His heart and conscience weren't crushed.

He went because he didn't want to face that discipline again.

The ultimate proof is the outcome of this in Jonah's life.

The most profound difference is that contrition leads to freedom

but attrition leads to slavery.

When you truly repent, you experience a glorious freedom from self-preservation.

You quit obsessing over avoiding consequences because you know what you deserve. You know you deserve whatever you get.

So you expose yourself completely and throw yourself on the mercy of God.

And that means you emerge from repentance a stronger person.

You are not as self-centered, you are not as defensive, not as angry.

When you quit blaming people and start saying, I've wronged you, I'm the problem, wonderful things can happen in relationships and communities. We'll see that in a moment.

False repentance is all about protecting yourself, bolstering your sense of self.

But it has the opposite effect.

You become mastered by your unwillingness to acknowledge you are wrong.

And that enslaves you to bitterness and anger.

You feel you are always on the receiving end of injustice.

Someone else is always wrong. And that eventually leads to bitterness and anger.

This dynamic is perfectly illustrated in Jonah.

He doesn't emerge from the fish crushed by his sin.

He's subdued. He's had the starch taken out of him. He's been badly scuffed.

But it becomes increasingly evident that he is mastered by his anger and bitterness.

Everybody else is wrong, even God. It starts in this chapter, gets worse in next.

Look at Jonah's message, look at his preaching.

God told him to go to Nineveh and call to repentance.

Jonah did it, but he did so with a negative, gloom and doom message.

"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned."

It would be as if I got in the pulpit one Sunday and said:

You people are sinners and you are going to hell. You're dismissed. Go home.

He didn't say, Listen to me. I'm a sinner just like you.

I've sinned against God and my fellow man. But the Lord was merciful to me.

He delivered me from death. He gave me another chance.

If you repent of your evil ways and ask his forgiveness, he will forgive you.

He will not bring on this city the disaster it deserves.

Only a repentant person could preach like that.

Jonah was a believer. He knew the Lord. He was saved, born-again.

And God didn't abandon him. He kept graciously pursuing him.

But this shows us that even true believers can go through seasons of attrition.

You can be sorry for the consequences, and deflect blame, and try to protect yourself and become enslaved to anger and bitterness for a time.

It has happened to some of you. In fact, some of you are in that place now.

Do you have a hard time admitting you are wrong? Only do so if you can mitigate it by blaming others. Problem emotions of anger or bitterness?

Husbands, what would your wife say about you? Wives?

Parents, what would your children say about you? Children?

Repentance is not only the pathway to forgiveness—it frees you from slavery to self-preservation, so that the broken and frayed places and relationships in your life can be put right again.

That brings us to the second point:

MP#2 Repentance Practiced

Let's get even more specific about how real repentance is practiced.

The great irony of this book is that Jonah himself, the Lord's prophet, the Israelite, the believer in the one true God, is the example of false repentance.

But the Ninevites—violent and cruel pagans—

who barely know anything about the Lord, are the ones who truly repent.

They are the ones who experience God's grace and mercy.

God was merciful to Jonah too. He kept pursuing Jonah.

But Jonah didn't experience God's mercy.

He didn't get to enjoy it because he shut God out.

Jonah is the negative example, the Ninevites are the positive example.

Several things they do that you should imitate.

1. You don't blame other people.

The Ninevites didn't start shouting at each other—this is your fault!

I told you to stop acting that way. Now we're going to be destroyed.

The king and his nobles didn't say: It's you citizens who are at fault.

We tried and tried to set a good example, but you didn't follow us.

The people didn't blame the king. You should have led us better.

It's because of corruption at the top that we are in trouble now.

They also didn't shift the blame to the messenger.

They didn't make the whole issue about how Jonah confronted them.

He didn't do it lovingly, he wasn't gentle enough, he was judgmental.

That's a very common response if you are confronted or exposed—

to try to make the whole issue about how your confrontation was handled.

You circle the wagons and get your friends to agree this person was judgmental.

If ever there was an occasion the blame the messenger for doing it wrong,

this was it. A horrible and ungracious approach. Lesson in how not to confront.

But they didn't even try to shift the blame to Jonah.

2. You name your sin.

There are a hundred different euphemisms we use to avoid calling it what it is.

I made a mistake. I messed up. I did something stupid. I wasn't thinking.

That's not confession. That's self-protection.

The king of Nineveh said: Let us give up our evil ways and our violence.

He called it evil—not a mistake, not something stupid.

And he named the particular sin—our violence.

I lied to you. I betrayed you. I disregarded you. I intentionally hurt you.

That was wrong. I gave in to greed, I cared only for myself, I sinned against you.

This is hugely important in the practice of true repentance.

3. You perform acts of contrition.

What physical acts did the king and people of Nineveh perform?

They put on sackcloth—rough, crude fabric that chafed the skin.

They sat in the dust and they fasted.

That seems so foreign to us. It sounds so—Catholic.

Does this have any place at all in New Testament Christianity?

Yes, it does. Look at it carefully. This was not penance.

Penance is punishing yourself in order to atone for your sin.

That's just another form of self-preservation. I'm paying for what I've done.

God's going to see how much I'm hurting myself and he'll forgive me.

Your guilt is magnified when you try to atone for sins by hurting yourself

because you are disregarding Christ's complete work of atonement.

But true repentance does express itself with acts of contrition.

There are hard and sometimes painful things you need to do

in order to properly express your sorrow over what you have done.

A pastor I know had a close pastor friend, an old seminary buddy.

They called each other often to talk about life and work.

He thought they had an open and honest friendship.

But his friend had a secret sin that nobody knew about.

It was exposed and he lost his ministry as a result of it.

This man, the one who had sinned, drove 300 miles to talk to his friend

face to face and ask his forgiveness. He could have called him on the phone.

But he knew that a proper expression of his sorrow required this difficult action.

If the Holy Spirit prompts you to do something as an expression of your repentance, big or small, even if it's hard, do it.

4. You pray to the Lord, trusting in his mercy and grace.

The Ninevites believed God and called out urgently to him.

Now, the Ninevites were pagans, but they sensed the mercy of God in Christ.

This prayer of repentance was a prayer of faith and salvation.

This was a remarkable event—the conversion of an entire city.

But I trust that most of you here are not pagans—you are Christians.

You have already been saved. All your sins, past, present, and future forgiven.

And yet, as part of the Christian life, it's still right to ask the Lord for forgiveness.

If you are a forgiven and saved child of God, what are you asking for?

You are asking him to give you assurance of his grace to you in Jesus.

Confirm in my heart, O Lord, that I am forgiven.

As I look on Jesus Christ, take these splinters of my life and conscience and rebuild me by your grace. And he will.

Tim Keller wrote an article several years ago titled *All of Life is Repentance*.

He got that from Martin Luther. The first of Luther's 95 Theses says:

Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ wants the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. That's important because it's easy to read this chapter as if repentance is only something you do occasionally for the really big sins.

No, it's part of our lives every day.

Repentance is the way we daily grow in grace.

Tim Keller gives a number of examples, but let me just give you two.

What if you have spoken unkind words to someone, thought unkindly about him?

What if you have been impatient and irritable, self-absorbed and indifferent?

Repent like this:

Think on the sacrificial love of Christ until you feel your coldness and indifference toward that person changing.

Think on his patience with you, until your impatience is challenged .

In other words, your prayer of repentance should not just be, Lord, I'm sorry for my impatience and indifference toward my spouse.

But Lord, show me your grace. Help me to see how patient and attentive you've been toward me. That will change you

Another example:

What if you have avoided people or tasks you know you should face?

What if you've been anxious or worried? Or if you've been rash or impulsive?

Repent like this:

Think on the way Jesus faced hard things for you. How he didn't flinch.

Keep doing that until you feel your cowardice eroding.

Think about how Jesus' death proves God cares and will watch over you.

Keep doing that until it speaks to your anxious or rash behavior.

In other words, your prayer of repentance should not just be,

Lord, I'm sorry I let fear and worry keep me from doing the right thing.

But Lord, show me your courage for me, let me sense your care.

Keep doing that until you become brave and calm enough to go forward with strategic boldness.

Repentance is the great gift of the Christian life.

Seek to have a contrite heart, because the Bible says:

A broken and contrite heart, O Lord, you will not despise.

What does the Lord despise? A proud heart. An unrepentant heart.

In your repentance, with the Holy Spirit's help—

don't blame other people, not even a little bit,

be honest with God and other people and call your sin what it is,

listen to the Holy Spirit if he tells you to perform some act of contrition—

And plead with the Lord, not just to forgive you—he already has done that—

but to enable you to see his grace to you in Jesus in a fresh way—

so that you are able to move forwards, a broken but restored person.