

“Don’t Wanna”

Reading: Jonah 3:1-4:11

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Today we’re talking about temper tantrums and pouty lips, the classic signs of childish behavior. I’ve been amazed over the last year how quickly Junia has developed her sense of will; it was inevitable that a child of me and Pastor Carey would be strong-willed. But I was surprised at how quickly she learned how to shake her head ‘no;’ she was doing it even before she understood what ‘no’ meant. Recently she’s been learning how to nod her head ‘yes’ as well, so we’re making good progress. We haven’t reached the point of temper tantrums yet, but that strong will is certainly under development. But temper tantrums and childish behavior are exactly what we’re dealing with when we read the book of Jonah. If children were the only ones who behaved childishly, we wouldn’t have the word “childish” in our dictionary. Childish behavior is only childish if you’re not a child, and yet childishness is something that can be all too easy to allow to slip into our spiritual lives.

What do I mean by that? Today we’re going to contrast two people and examine their reactions to God so that we can examine our own lives and repent of any childishness we might be holding onto. The first person is Jonah. Everybody knows about Jonah from the story about the giant fish swallowing him up and then spitting him out three days later; that all happened in the first two chapters of the book. But Jonah’s story isn’t really about the fish, and it’s not really even about the people of Nineveh. It’s about Jonah and his reaction to God, and ultimately it’s a message intended to convict the people of God, not sinners who are far away from Him. It’s a story about the childishness we can all have in us, when we know what the will of God is but our response is a pouty-lipped “I don’t wanna!” Again, childishness is only childish when you’re old enough to know better. Jonah was old enough to know better, and a lot of the time we are, too.

The city of Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire, the enemy of Jonah and his people at that time. The Assyrians were busy gobbling up little countries like Israel, and they weren’t very nice in how they did it. They used brutal tactics without repentance. They would smash your entire country and keep right on going to smash the next one. Their kings bragged about how many people they killed, how they tortured them, how they even killed all the animals, which was an incredibly cruel thing to do in an age when everyone was a farmer of some sort; not only did they conquer you, they crushed you and destroyed any hope you had of providing for yourself in the future. And God told this prophet, Jonah, to go preach to these horrible people and call them to repent. And Jonah’s response was, “I don’t wanna!” and he ran in the opposite direction.

You probably know at least a little bit of what happens then: the ship Jonah is fleeing on is threatened by storms, and as a last resort to save themselves the sailors throw Jonah overboard. He’s swallowed by a giant fish which over the course of three days carries him back to his starting point. Along the way Jonah goes through his own repentance and cries out to God, and then, to put it bluntly, the fish pukes him out.

We jumped in at chapter 3, when we see a beautiful act of God’s grace: “Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time.” He gets a second chance with his mission, which is good news for any of us. With the wisdom of a man who has just survived being swallowed by a fish, Jonah obeys this time, and heads to the city of his enemies. Once he’s there, he preaches a sermon that every

preacher is jealous of. Our translation has it as, "Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned." That's only five words in the Hebrew that the book was written in; you get the impression that Jonah isn't going to give these Ninevites any more than the bare minimum. But the result is instant and universal repentance. It's the shortest but most effective sermon I've ever heard. It would be like me getting into the pulpit one Sunday and grumpily saying, "You're all going to burn in hell," then sitting down, and that short non-sermon sparking a national revival. Jonah didn't even tell them to repent, much less tell them which God to turn to, but the word of God in this case is so powerful that even the barest minimum easily accomplishes what God intends. Even the animals are included in the city's repentance, and God has compassion on the people of Nineveh.

The story isn't over yet, though, because the story isn't about the fish or even the people of Nineveh. The story is about Jonah, and Jonah isn't done with his temper tantrum toward God. Jonah heads out of town and finds a good spot to watch the fireworks, because he's sure that these Ninevites deserve some righteous smiting, and we have to admit that he's right. God's grace shouldn't be that easy for people as wicked as the Ninevites were, but then it wouldn't be grace. Jonah gets upset, because he knew God was going to do this. This is exactly why he didn't want to come to Nineveh in the first place, because these people deserved destruction and they didn't deserve a chance to repent, and he knew God would be gracious toward them if they asked. And God asks him, "Do you have a right to be angry?" Does the grace given to someone else cheapen the grace that is given to you? Does our judgment of someone's righteousness override God's love for them?

Jonah doesn't answer. Instead, he stomps off to find some shade so he can pout and hope that the city gets judged. But God was not finished with His conversation with Jonah. God causes a vine to grow over Jonah to give him some more shade, which makes Jonah feel better. But then the next day, oddly enough, God sends a worm to chew on the vine to cause it to wither, so that the sun rose and the hot wind blew and Jonah didn't have his shelter. And Jonah says the same thing that is said in so many temper tantrums thrown by people of all ages, "I wish I was dead." And then as we read, God asks him a probing question: "Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?"

Jonah's response is, I think, hilarious, because this is exactly the sort of thing you shout when you're in the middle of a tantrum. Of course we all know that Jonah doesn't have a right to be angry about the vine growing up and withering, but his immediate response is, "I *do* have a right to be angry! I'm angry enough to die!" This is not a mature, well thought-out theological argument, folks. This is the petulance of someone who knows what God is calling them to do, knows what the right thing is, but is cranky and tired and acting a little childish and would rather insist, in spite of all wisdom, that God has to be wrong and we deserve to be right.

Here's a little secret about pastoring that Pastor Carey and I have learned pretty well over the last few years: when people get all worked up over something, nine times out of ten you're going to have to dig a little bit to get to what's really making them angry. When someone gets upset at a surface problem, there's usually a deeper problem driving it. Jonah is angry that God called him to go to the Ninevites and give them a chance to repent, and he's angry that they repented, and he's angry that God accepted their repentance. The plant is just an opportunity to express his crankiness. The problem is that this grace of God wasn't supposed to be so freely given in Jonah's opinion. Jonah's enemies were bad people who deserved punishment: he didn't want to give them a chance. God had

a desire to move in the lives of a hundred and twenty thousand people, but Jonah couldn't let go of that prejudice that was holding him back from participating in the beautiful work of God's kingdom.

Let's contrast Jonah with someone a little more contemporary. Because on the one hand we have Jonah who is off pouting because God is showing His grace to those who don't deserve it, and on the other hand we have people like Bishop Desmond Tutu, who demonstrated the Christian teaching that God can redeem even those who seem unredeemable. Many of you will remember that from 1948 to 1994, the nation of South Africa operated under the system of government known as apartheid. It was a system of institutionalized segregation that allowed the country's white minority to enjoy power and privilege, while nonwhites were classified, restricted, and brutally dehumanized as a part of national policy. Aside from the daily indignities of segregation, nonwhites were regularly threatened, imprisoned, tortured, murdered, or simply disappeared. In response, mobs and terrorists retaliated by committing their own atrocities against whites and those seen as collaborating with them. When apartheid finally fell in the early nineties, the question for those in power was how to move forward as a nation.

Bishop Tutu realized that the entire nation had been brutalized, and so he was instrumental in charting a course that would allow the nation to heal. He wrote of how there was a need to avoid either of the two most obvious options available, what he called "Nuremburg or national amnesia." The victorious majority could have rounded up those in the minority who had been the worst perpetrators of atrocities, put them on public trial, and done justice upon them, as the Allies did to Nazi War criminals at the Nuremburg trials after World War 2. Doing so in South Africa would be nearly impossible, given the sheer number of guilty parties, not to mention that doing so would only deepen the already traumatic wounds between the races. The alternative would seem to be national amnesia, trying to more or less forget what happened and move on in the name of progress, but this would be a dishonest denial of what had happened, and a dehumanizing of those who had suffered.

Instead of either extreme, South Africa established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that was empowered to grant amnesty to perpetrators of crimes against humanity who were willing to confess publicly and in detail their crimes. The goal was not punishment, the goal was truth, confession, repentance, and reconciliation. Punishment does not undo the crime. Ignoring the crime does not heal the hurt. They found a third way: bring the crime into the light through confession, and recognize the humanity of both the perpetrator and the victim. "There is no such thing as a totally hopeless case," he has said. One of his books is titled *No Future Without Forgiveness*, recognizing that true, lasting peace can only come through forgiveness and redemption.

Bishop Tutu knew that prejudice or hatred toward anyone, even when they deserve it, is an insult to the grace of God. If anything, those people need God's grace more than you do. Where Jonah was giving the Ninevites only the bare minimum and was not-so-secretly hoping that they would have to face the wrath of God for their sins, Desmond Tutu was building a movement with the hope not only of receiving justice for the victims, but also of redeeming those who had participated in the injustice and evil. He was hoping to save both his own people and their enemies. That takes a mature faith. We've got to give up our pouty lips and quit telling God that we're mad enough to die if we want to see the kingdom of God do a work like that.

So many times we know what the will of God is. He's told us that He wants us to love one another and to love Him wholeheartedly. We see Jesus Christ on the cross, given for us, and we know that this is how we ought to live. We know that our first calling is to follow Jesus Christ. And yet we stomp our feet, and we stick out our bottom lips, and we grumble and complain and slam doors because surely, God, you can't expect me to go *there*. Surely, Lord, you can't expect me to love *them*, because they don't deserve it. Surely, Lord, you don't expect me to forgive so-and-so. Surely you don't want me to give up *that* for you. I don't want to. I have a right to be angry that you've taken away my vine.

You know, it's worth noting that God accomplished His intentions even though Jonah fought Him every step of the way. The message to Nineveh was still proclaimed, even though Jonah did it through clenched teeth. The people repented and the city was saved, even though Jonah was really hoping to see some fire and brimstone. God is going to carry out His work. Jesus Christ is going to bring His kingdom. The difference lies in where we are in relationship to that work. We can be right in the middle of it, giving ourselves wholeheartedly to the beautiful, confusing, challenging, messy work of God in redeeming the lost, or we can be crossing our arms and tapping our feet and shaking our heads off on the sideline somewhere, on the outside looking in. The choice is ours.



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