

18th Sun. after Pent.
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Understand God's Unfair Grace

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Jonah 4:5-11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Suppose I did a poll today and the question was: "What is the book of Jonah all about?" I think the vast majority would answer: "It's about Jonah and the whale!" If I would press you for details, you would probably recall Jonah's disobedience to God's command. God set him straight after three days in the belly of a great fish. Then Jonah obeyed God and preached to the people of Nineveh. So what's the book of Jonah all about? Obedience to God! Oppose him and you'll run into trouble. Do what he says and you'll be blessed! Good summary?

I think it completely misses what God is trying to teach us in this book. More than anything, the book of Jonah teaches us something, not about Jonah, but about God. It teaches us that God's grace is not only undeserved, but from a human perspective it's downright unfair. So "God's unfair grace" is really the theme of the book.

I would suggest to you today that this might be a concept that you may not entirely grasp. I think most if not all of us would understand that our God is a God of grace and mercy. But has it ever crossed your mind to describe him as a God of *unfair* grace? This idea is harder for us to believe.

Let me explain. Even though we confess that we are saved by God's grace and not by our works, isn't there a big part of us that wants to think we are still somewhat deserving of God's grace? I mean, really, should anyone be too surprised that God made *me* his child? After all, I'm a pretty decent person. I've always been a church goer. I've never been in trouble with the law. I've done quite a bit with my life. And if you knew my parents and what godly people they are... and my grandparents. I mean, just look at my heritage, and who I am. Not that I'm bragging, I mean I know I'm saved by grace and all. But come on, it's not really a shocker that I'm a recipient of God's grace, is it?

Friends, this type of thinking is in each of us. A part of us likes to think that we are "just" recipients of God's grace. That it is right and fair that God would pour out his grace and forgiveness *on me*.

Now listen: I would like to propose to you today that you will only have a **true and proper faith in God** if you understand and believe that God's grace is essentially unfair. I propose that you will not be able to offer **proper, thankful obedience to God** in your daily life unless you understand and believe that God's grace is unfair.

So let's give careful attention to what God is teaching us in the book of Jonah. The main verse we want to give our attention to are at the very end of the book, but we'll be served well to remember the whole story. I'll summarize, so take some time this week to read the whole book. It's a very short book and it's all a continuous story so it's very easy reading. I doubt it will take you more than 15 minutes.

The word of the LORD came to Jonah, and told him to go to the city of Nineveh to warn them about their great wickedness. Now understand that Nineveh was the capital city of the Assyrian empire... a mighty empire that was still growing in power. They were Israel's enemies, attacking them again and again. They were a cruel and wicked people. Anthropologists tell us they were among the cruelest people ever... right up there with the Aztecs and the Vikings. When they went to war, they were brutal and vicious. Every male they captured was tortured to death. They would kill every child prisoner. Woman prisoners were made slaves. The Assyrians also practiced child sacrifice in worshiping their idol gods. Sexual immorality was the norm, not the exception. Nineveh was ripe for judgment. Jonah knew it and everyone knew it.

So when the word of the Lord came to Jonah to go and prophecy to that city that God was angry about their wickedness, you would think that he would jump at the opportunity. He didn't. In fact, you know the story. He headed the opposite direction and jumped on a ship to get as far away from Nineveh as possible. Why did Jonah not want to obey God in this? Jonah suspected there was a chance that after his preaching, the people just might repent. Jonah knew that God is a God of grace. In fact, he understood something we struggle to understand: God is a God of unfair grace. Jonah knew there was a chance that God just might forgive these people. There was a chance they might be spared! And he just didn't want it. He preferred that they continue in their wickedness and so fall under God's judgment. They deserved to be punished and Jonah could not accept the fact that God might show them unfair grace.

You know the story. The ship he's on is battered by a storm. Jonah, at his own request, is thrown overboard. But instead of drowning he is swallowed by a large fish. Although he surely didn't deserve it, for three days he miraculously survives until God has the fish spit him up onto dry ground.

Jonah got the message. The disobedient prophet was shown mercy and grace. His life was spared. He was now ready to preach to the undeserving people of Nineveh. He proclaims God's message, "40 more days and your city will be destroyed!" What Jonah feared most, happened. The people are filled with sorrow. Even their proud king put on sackcloth and sat in ashes. He commanded everyone to do the same, and ordered a three day fast. His hope? **"Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish."** That's exactly what happened: **"When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened."**

Jonah was so furious that these undeserving people were receiving God grace, that he literally wanted to die. God's grace was so unfair! He just couldn't stand it. Wouldn't you think that God would have given up on his prophet at this point? But he doesn't. Instead God shows unfair grace to this stubborn prophet by teaching him about unfair grace. Listen to the end of the book:

Jonah 4:5-11 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. 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.

In spite of all God said, Jonah was still hoping for a fire and brimstone destruction of the city. So he set up camp east of the city to get a view of the destruction he hoped would ensue. Being

in desert country, it was HOT. God made some kind of plant or vine grow over him. It provided shade for him. Jonah was happy about the vine. It was just a meaningless, mindless plant, but Jonah was happy because of it. He really, really liked it.

But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 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."

Jonah seemed to have an air for the dramatic. The vine withered. His shade was gone. The source of his happiness was gone. It was blazing hot and Jonah felt like he was going to pass out. Without his beloved vine shading him, he even says, "It would be better for me to die than to live." Now Jonah was ready to learn God's object lesson.

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." 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. 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?"

Up to this point, Jonah just didn't understand the concept that God's grace truly is unfair. And that's what makes God so awesome. So God teaches his prophet. God says, "Jonah, think about how passionate you are about a random, mindless vine. You had no part in its creation, growth, or life, yet were emotionally attached to it. You want to die without that vine! So don't you understand, Jonah, my emotional attachment to these people? I did create them, I sustain them, and I want them to be mine forever... the people, the children... I even care about their cows! Jonah, that's unfair grace. It's the kind of God I am. It's the *only* kind of grace I show!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you understand God's unfair grace? God doesn't give us what we deserve... and that's called mercy. We deserve his anger, punishment and eternal destruction... but he doesn't do that to us. That's mercy! But "grace" is that God *does* give us what we don't deserve! Grace is God's undeserved love for sinners. Because that love is undeserved it's also unfair. In fact, to say, "Unfair grace" is really redundant. It's like saying, "Wet water." If it's water, of course it's wet. Burning fire. If there's a fire, of course it's burning. Or "Catholic Pope." If he's the pope, of course he's Catholic. Listen: Unfair grace. If it's grace, then of course it's unfair. Grace is always undeserved. And if you get something you haven't earned and don't deserve, then that's unfair. So unfair grace is redundant. Yet it's a concept we struggle to grasp and believe.

And here's why it's so important to understand that God's grace is unfair. We do not have a true faith in God unless we know and believe that God's grace is unfair. When you *do* know and believe God's grace is unfair, that means you fully grasp and accept the fact that you are unlovable by God. That you are not lovely to God. It means you grasp and accept the fact that you are disobedient in your thoughts, words and actions... every day. It means you realize and acknowledge that you often think that you know better than God. You know what God wants you to do, but you rationalize your disobedience: "But in this unique circumstance... at this particular time... I am justified in doing what I think I should do instead of what God says I

should do.” Can you see this in yourself? Do you acknowledge your guilt? Do you see your sin? Do you acknowledge your disobedience? Is your rebellion revealed?

If so, your gracious God points you to the cross of Calvary 2000 years ago. He says, “See my Son? My perfect Son? See him hanging there? See him bleeding? See him dying? He’s there in your place... as your substitute. If I was simply just, right and fair, you would be hanging on that cross. You would die there. You would be separated from me for eternity. But I have decided not to be fair with you. Instead I treat you with my unfair grace. My Son... for you. Your guilt is removed completely and forever because of him. You didn’t deserve it, but I created you, I sustain you, and I want you to be mine forever. So I showered you with unfair, undeserved love, favor and kindness. You are forgiven. You are my child!”

Isn’t God’s unfair grace amazing? I would suggest to you that when you fully understand and believe in God’s unfair grace for you, that this will give you a whole new way of living every single day of your life. When you fully grasp and rejoice in the unfair grace God has shown *you*, you will have a renewed desire to thank God by bringing your life completely in line with his will. When you know his grace, you want to thank him. You want to please him. You want to obey him.

In view of God’s grace, your daily chores take on new meaning. They are opportunities to worship God. Giving regular offerings to church takes on a new meaning. It’s returning to God a portion of what he’s entrusted to your care and knowing he’ll provide for all your needs (even though you don’t deserve it.) This understanding of God’s unfair grace pours over into every relationship, everything you do, and even your whole attitude and way of thinking.

Friends, go today and meditate on this truth and let it truly sink in. Understand what the prophet Jonah struggled to understand. In spite of what you deserve, God showers you with undeserved kindness by forgiving all your sins, making you family, and promising you an eternity with him forever in heaven. Understand unfair grace, and your life now and forever is changed and blessed!

Amen.