

The Problem of Grace: The Problem of Self-Righteousness – Jonah 1:17-2:10

I'm going to read you a couple of quotes and then tell you who said them. *"Better to live a day as a lion than 100 years as a sheep."* Sounds pretty good? Pretty motivating? Benito Mussolini. *"It takes less courage to criticize the decisions of others than to stand by your own."* Alright. I like that. Attila the Hun. *"Words build bridges into unexplored regions."* Any guesses as to who said that one? Adolf Hitler.

The meaning of those words feels different when you know who said them and understand a little bit about the type of person who spoke them and the context they were spoken into. I'm not comparing Jonah to Attila the Hun this morning, but it's very easy for us to open our Bibles to Jonah 2, see a prayer from Jonah where he says things like "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you" and think this is a good prayer and Jonah has come around. But everything about Jonah 1 leads us to believe Jonah is still rejecting God's commands and then as we read chapters 3 and 4 we realize that even after the fish experience nothing has changed for Jonah. Yes he goes to Ninevah, but his heart is no different. Here's how one author explains this prayer: *"This is not a prayer of repentance. Jonah is thankful that God has shown him mercy and kept him alive, but his words - juxtaposed to chapter 1 - show that he is just as narrow and stubborn as before."* – Eric Tully

Our study in Jonah is called *The Problem of Grace*, and this chapter helps us to see why grace is a problem. Jonah likes grace, a lot, when it's shown to him. But as he prays to God we get a glimpse into his heart and find it overrun with self-righteousness. Jonah thinks that he somehow deserves God's grace. He's very proud of his own response to this situation and he looks down on others for their sins.

We tend to associate self-righteousness with the pharisees, and with strict and legalistic Christians, and yet, this is a disease that afflicts all of us. Author Trevin Wax put it like this: *The human heart's default mode is self-justification – a desire to put forth our own righteousness in order to maintain our standing before God and others.* – Trevin Wax

We can't truly grasp grace until we learn to let go of self-righteousness and trust the righteousness of Christ that has been given by grace to us. So how do we know if we are living with self-righteousness? Let's look at Jonah's prayer and we'll see **5 Signs of Self-Righteousness and God's Response To It.**

1. Thankful for Grace...for Me (vv. 1-2)

Last week we saw Jonah flee from God's command to head to Ninevah and communicate God's message to the people there. He ends up on a boat and God stops his plans cold by hurling a storm at the ship. Jonah refuses to turn to God in repentance and ends up tossed in the ocean by the sailors in order to save them. Look with me at 1:15. If this is your first time in the book it would be natural to assume that Jonah drowned. But God has other plans. Look at verse 17.

Throughout this book God exercises His sovereign power to direct Jonah's life and also to patiently instruct Him. We'll see this again in chapter 4. But for now Jonah is swallowed by the fish and God miraculously keeps Him alive for 3 days and 3 nights. There's a movie called *In the Heart of the Sea* about a whaling ship and there's a scene in it where they make a teenager on his first voyage crawl into the carcass of a dead whale to collect more oil. It's a horrifying experience and I can't help but think of that when I read about Jonah here.

But God keeps Jonah alive and Jonah is certainly thankful for that and this leads him to pray. Look at 2:1-2. Notice how he describes his situation as being in Sheol. This word indicates the place of death in the OT and Jonah certainly felt like he was there. Throughout the book of Jonah so far we have seen Jonah moving in one direction after he fled from God. Look back to 1:3. Now look at 1:5. Then he gets thrown into the sea and now descends to the brink of death. Look at 2:6.

The descent of Jonah shows what sin does to us and God intends this to cause Jonah to repent. And yet, there's nothing of repentance in this prayer. Being thankful for grace is not the same thing as understanding grace and turning from your sin to trust in God. You can be thankful for the good things God has brought into your life and be steeped in self-righteousness. He really starts to show this in verses 3-4.

2. Self-Centeredness (vv. 3-4)

Notice how off Jonah's perspective of what has happened is in these verses. It's completely oriented toward self. Let me read them. "For you cast me in the deep". But that's not what happened. Jonah got thrown into the sea because of his sin. Look at verse 4. I am driven from your sight? No Jonah, you ran from God's presence. 1:3. Jonah's self-righteousness gives him a lens to interpret circumstances in a self-centered way. It's all about him. And when this is your lens, it's difficult to notice it because it's just the way you see the world and interpret life. And this self-centeredness comes from our third sign of self-righteousness.

3. Failure to Recognize My Sin (vv. 5-6)

Jonah interprets the whole situation wrongly in verses 3-4 and then he spells out the results of what he believes God has done to him in verses 5-6. He's suffering and he describes the impact of these events on him, but he never mentions his own sin. Think about that for a second. This entire prayer never once mentions Jonah's wrongdoing. There's no acknowledgement of sin.

His disobedience doesn't seem to matter that much to him. He doesn't think he's really done anything wrong. This is often a tactic for us in our self-righteousness. If you are going to believe you are righteous before God and others, you can't acknowledge your sin. You have to ignore it or excuse it. Jonah may have thought something like this, well, yeah I went to Tarshish, but I didn't hurt anyone, or give the wrong message from God, or lie, or kill anyone. And, I was willing to be tossed overboard to save the men on the ship. Look what a good guy I am!

When you and I fail to see our sin and we excuse it, we automatically fall into the next sign.

4. Self-Justification (vv. 7-9)

Only once in this prayer does Jonah mention God's deliverance of him in verse 6 and he doesn't mention his own sin. Instead, he goes right back to his own actions. Most of the prayer is attuned to what Jonah has done and that's most clear in verses 7-9. Jonah is enamored with his own performance. He's a good dude. He's a Hebrew. A prophet. He worships the one true God. He prays. Even in

a difficult situation like this, Jonah reaches out to God. This is why God has delivered him, clearly! One author put it like this: *"In the midst of this terrifying and oppressive situation, Jonah finds his own behavior worthy of extended comment."* – Daniel Timmer

Self-justification gets to the heart of self-righteousness. We are all broken and corrupted by sin. Sin has impacted every part of who we are causing guilt, shame, and the realization that we aren't in a right standing with God. Something is off. And so we try to solve this problem by either downplaying our guilt, as we've just seen, or exalting our own righteousness. We compare ourselves to others. We focus on the good things we've done. We try to do more good things to feel better. To tip the scales in our favor. And this leads us to look down on others to be more sure of our own righteousness.

5. Harsh Toward Others (v. 8)

Look at verse 8 again. Jonah is very attentive to the sins of others. Why in the world is he mentioning those who worship vain idols here? Idol worshipers are the real problem! Not me. They are the bad ones with the real sins. I'm a part of God's chosen people. Notice how he contrasts them with his own actions in verse 9.

It's so ironic because what have we just seen in chapter 1? A bunch of sailors who initially responded to the storm by praying to their idols in verse 5 were changed by God's grace to acknowledge the one true God in verse 16. The very thing Jonah says he's going to do has been done by these pagan sailors. They aren't beyond God's reach, just Jonah's because he is focused on justifying himself.

Self-righteousness often shows itself in harshness toward others. Condemnation on other Christians for not being as theologically astute or not practicing church the way we do. Viewing the world as the enemy rather than the mission field in need of grace. Jonah certainly falls into that in this book.

It's not that self-righteous people can't say anything correct. Notice Jonah's last words from inside the fish in verse 9. That's exactly right but Jonah hasn't grasped the full truth of those words at all. Salvation does belong to the Lord and He will save out of grace and not because we are righteous or believe ourselves to be

righteous. He will save pagan sailors, violent Assyrians, and even self-righteous prophets. And this is true for us today. God will save by His grace those who have different political positions than you and I, different ways of life, worship different gods, and he will even save the pious and self-righteous who think they've been doing it the right way for 50 years.

So, these are the 5 signs of self-righteousness. What is God's response?

6. God's Response (v. 10)

I know it's possible to read this verse purely on a physical level. The fish really did vomit Jonah onto the land. But it's worth considering that after Jonah's display of self-justification and self-righteousness, if God may have done this to make another point. Listen to Leviticus 18:24-25, 28. God loathes this perspective.

So, what is the antidote to self-righteousness? If this is hard wired into us, how do we extricate ourselves from its grasp? It has to start with a deep and honest recognition of my own sin. It's not just that I do some bad things occasionally. It's not just that I choose to sin. It's a much bigger problem than that. I am a sinner. I am corrupt to the core of my being. I'm like a sponge immersed in water, still a human but soaked through with sin. It's my nature to sin. My thoughts, feelings, actions, desires, and perspectives are influenced by sin. It's worse than I believe it is. Ephesians 2:1. Romans 3:9-11. I am not righteous, but I need to be righteous because God is righteous. I can't simply compare myself to other unrighteous people. It's like a big dog believing he's a human because he's closer in size to a human than a small dog. Nope. Still a dog. Still a sinner.

And this is a problem because I can never achieve a righteous status on my own and this is what's so insane about self-righteousness. But the beauty of staring your own sin full in the face and coming to grips with how bad it is, is that God has provided a real and true righteousness for you that you couldn't earn and don't deserve. This is the righteousness of Jesus Christ and it is applied to you because of what Jesus did on the cross and you receive it through faith as a gift, not through effort and striving, and your own goodness. Romans 5:6-9.

How do we battle against our tendency toward self-righteousness? The answer is the truth of justification. Here's what that word means: God declares sinful people righteous because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This happens through faith alone in Him. And so, we must return to this core truth of Scripture. We are not righteous in God's eyes because of keeping commands, being a good Christian, doing better than others, reading theology books, joining a good church, keeping the sacraments, being baptized, or anything else other than through Jesus Christ. The truth of justification allows you to humbly acknowledge your sin and joyfully revel in God's grace toward you and toward others as well.

"Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives. Many have so light an apprehension of God's holiness and of the extent and guilt of their sin that consciously they see little need for justification, although below the surface of their lives they are deeply guilt-ridden and insecure. Many others have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for justification...drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willing disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther's platform: you are accepted, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude." - Lovelace

Let's pray.

Sermon Reflection Questions – 8/9/26

- How would you describe the problem of grace? Give an example of a time when you have experienced this in your own life?
- How would you describe self-righteousness? Why is this a problem?
- Jonah's overall direction is down through chapters 1 and 2. Talk about a time of life when you felt like you were going down. What was helpful to you during this season?
- What would it look like in your life to be thankful for the good things God has brought your way and still be self righteous?
- If your interpretive lens is self centered, which is hard to notice, how can I become aware of my need to change lenses?
- Have you ever found yourself giving excuses for sin before? What sort of excuses come easiest for you?
- What are some signs that you are enamored with your own performance spiritually?
- Give an example of a time when you were harsh with someone else. Was this connected to self-righteousness?

- What are some ways to honestly come to grips with your own sin?
- Why is it necessary to deal honestly with your own sin nature in order to overcome self-righteousness?
- How does justification by faith alone help us to battle against self-righteousness?