

“Frustrated by Grace”

(The scripture readings are within the sermon)

Pastor James York

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Are you sometimes frustrated by grace? If you spent hours studying every week all year long to earn an A in class and one of your classmates didn't even turn in a single assignment yet the teacher was gracious and gave you both As. Would you be in awe of the grace of the teacher or frustrated, angry, upset by the teacher's grace? If you worked together on a team, correction you and a few others work together but one person always shows up late, contributes nothing, and leaves early and all of you get promoted and recognized for a job well done. Would you be in awe of the grace of your employer or frustrated that the slacker was honored, recognized and paid as much as you? You serve giving countless hours to a mission and ministry of the church. Do you desire some type of thanks or celebrate the opportunity to serve unrecognized? You give generously to ministry. Do you expect to be blessed or are you grateful for the opportunity to give? Do you truly like that God loves everyone, that God forgives everyone no matter what they do, that God freely gives salvation? When you ponder these matters are you in awe of God's generous grace or frustrated that it is freely given? Does it anger you that God loves people you dislike as much as God loves you?

Jonah was a good Jew. He went to temple, generously served, loved his neighbors and strived to follow all the Jewish laws and customs. Jonah knew God. Jonah knew that God is merciful, compassionate and filled with unending love. Perhaps that is the greatest miracle of the Jonah story. Jonah really knew God's mercy, compassion, unending love and grace. How did Jonah come to know God and intimately experience God's compassion? In those days God was believed to reside in the Holy of Holies which they believed had to be enclosed, sealed and shielded or God's holiness would destroy everyone, for everyone is sinful. I don't know about you but that does not say, God is compassionate to me. In those days it was believed that to be forgiven you needed to make a sacrifice for every sin you committed. Again that doesn't seem very compassionate or gracious. In those days there was a hierarchy. The priest supposedly knew God the best and passed down God's blessings and the knowledge of God. Yet despite all of this Jonah really knew God and God's mercy, compassion, unending love and grace.

Why have so many given Jonah a bad rap, labeling him the reluctant prophet, the rebellious prophet, the lazy prophet, the angry prophet? Instead it seems we should be seeking to learn from Jonah, a man who knew God and God's mercy, compassion unending love and grace.

If you look closely at the Jonah story you will notice that God is asking Jonah, asking us, a lot of questions. The story is unfinished. God is inviting us into the story, for the Jonah story is your story, my story, our story.

Jonah sensed that God wants him to go and tell the people of Nineveh about God. Jesus has commissioned each of us to tell others about God. Nineveh is a dangerous place for a Jew. The army of Nineveh looted and burned their way through Jonah's country, ruthlessly beating and killing people. They committed all kinds of war crimes even selling children into slavery. Jonah likely had his property destroyed, some relatives killed and some nieces and nephews sold into slavery by the very people God is asking him to go and tell about God.

This is similar to God's call to concentration camp survivors to forgive and tell those who held them captive about God. Similar to God's call to us, the people of the United States, to forgive and tell terrorist about God. It makes going into a strange neighborhood and knocking on doors to tell people about God look easy. Yet how many of us fail to even tell our co-workers and friends about God?

Jonah procrastinates. Have you ever sensed God prompting you to reach out to someone but you procrastinate? Perhaps Jonah procrastinated for many reasons however only one is given in scripture.

Jonah explains **Jonah 4:2** **“I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love.”**

Jonah is frustrated by God’s grace. Brett Younger preached, “Jonah’s sin is that he feels superior to some of God’s children. We share Jonah’s tendency to shy away from people who are not like us. We choose not to share who we are with people who may not appreciate who we are.” Brett said, “The story is about the pain of discovering that God loves people we don’t like every bit as much as God loves us. We may want to think that we like the idea of God loving everybody, but we live with Jonah’s attitude. We spend out time with people who make us feel comfortable. We help people we know. For the most part we are friends with people who look like us.” Our love for God’s children that are different from us tends to be less than our desire to be comfortable. Brett believes this story is all about the size of God’s grace and patience which is bigger than our prejudice.

Perhaps Jonah’s procrastination stems from something even deeper. Perhaps the grief and pain of burying people he loved, who were murdered by people from Nineveh, is what is keeping Jonah from telling the people of Nineveh about God. Since Jonah knew God and knew about God’s compassion and unfailing love I suspect Jonah was able to see the people of Nineveh as equally beloved children of God. Perhaps Jonah is just not ready to see God forgive the people who hurt him.

Jonah procrastinates. God remains persistent until Jonah agrees to walk the streets of Nineveh telling all about God. Evangelism, telling others about God, scares many of us. Jonah is being an evangelist across nationality, culture and religion. What should you say about God to people from different religions? What should you say to people with no belief at all? There is a strong tension between proclaiming your personal beliefs, your religion and God’s universe grace for everyone. In the Jonah story not a single person from Nineveh converts religions. Scripture says **Jonah 3:10** **“When God saw that they had put a stop to their evil ways, God had mercy on them”**

How does God’s grace, God forgiving the evil that someone does and God’s unfailing love for everyone make you feel? If it makes you angry then perhaps you are trying to change God into your image instead of changing yourself into God’s image. We have a tendency to want God to change to fit our purposes, cater to our needs, secure our interests, justify our goals and support our actions. Instead of celebrating God’s grace and changing into the image of God, a God of mercy, compassion and unfailing love.

The symptom of anger reveals the disease of trying to make God into our image. It is wrong thinking that says, God is for us and against them. We deserve redemption and they condemnation. Who we judge to be just should prosper and those we disapprove of should struggle. Holiness is about segregation from the impure. Our mission is to withdraw, withhold blessings to our denomination, withhold prayers of peace and prosperity for our nation and our allies, to restrict God’s grace and redemption, to condemn. Instead we are invited to change into the image of God, to be compassionate, forgiving and loving of all people. We are invited to reflect on God’s character, redemptive work and steadfast love. God forgives, embraces, restores and blesses all people.

Jonah concludes **Jonah 3:10-4-11** **“When God saw that Nineveh had put a stop to their evil ways, God had mercy on them and didn’t carry out the destruction God had threatened. This change of plans greatly upset Jonah, and he became very angry. So he complained to the Lord about it: “Didn’t I say before I left home that you would do this, Lord? That is why I ran away to Tarshish! I knew that you are a merciful and compassionate God, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. You are eager to turn back from destroying people. Just kill me now, Lord! I’d rather be dead than alive if what I predicted will not happen.”** The Lord replied, **“Is it right for you to be angry about this?”** Then Jonah went out to the east side of the city and made a shelter to sit under as he waited to see what would happen to the city. And the Lord God arranged for a leafy plant to grow there, and soon it spread its broad leaves over Jonah’s head, shading him from the sun. This eased his discomfort, and Jonah was very grateful for the plant. But God also arranged for a worm! The next morning at dawn the worm ate through the stem of the plant so that it withered away. And as the sun grew hot, God arranged for a scorching east wind to blow on Jonah.

The sun beat down on his head until he grew faint and wished to die. “Death is certainly better than living like this!” he exclaimed. Then God said to Jonah, “Is it right for you to be angry because the plant died?” “Yes,” Jonah retorted, “even angry enough to die!” Then the Lord said, “You feel sorry about the plant, though you did nothing to put it there. It came quickly and died quickly. But Nineveh has more than 120,000 people living in spiritual darkness, not to mention all the animals. Shouldn’t I feel sorry for such a great city?”

Are you frustrated by God’s grace? When God prompts you to tell another about God do you procrastinate? Are you angry when things do not go as you plan and predict? In the face of God’s gracious forgiveness for another are you tempted to walk away from the party to sulk and complain? Hopefully you, like Jonah, know God and know that God is merciful, compassionate and filled with unfailing love. For knowing that means you know that no matter how much you procrastinate, no matter how much you run, no matter where you hide, no matter how slow you are to forgive, no matter how angry you become you will be graciously forgiven and redeemed.

Jesus said Matthew 20:1-15 ““For the Kingdom of Heaven is like the landowner who went out early one morning to hire workers for his vineyard. He agreed to pay the normal daily wage and sent them out to work. “At nine o’clock in the morning he was passing through the marketplace and saw some people standing around doing nothing. So he hired them, telling them he would pay them whatever was right at the end of the day. So they went to work in the vineyard. At noon and again at three o’clock he did the same thing. “At five o’clock that afternoon he was in town again and saw some more people standing around. He asked them, ‘Why haven’t you been working today?’ “They replied, ‘Because no one hired us.’ “The landowner told them, ‘Then go out and join the others in my vineyard.’ “That evening he told the foreman to call the workers in and pay them, beginning with the last workers first. When those hired at five o’clock were paid, each received a full day’s wage. When those hired first came to get their pay, they assumed they would receive more. But they, too, were paid a day’s wage. When they received their pay, they protested to the owner, ‘Those people worked only one hour, and yet you’ve paid them just as much as you paid us who worked all day in the scorching heat.’ “He answered one of them, ‘Friend, I haven’t been unfair! Didn’t you agree to work all day for the usual wage? Take your money and go. I wanted to pay this last worker the same as you. Is it against the law for me to do what I want with my money? Should you be jealous because I am kind to others?’”

God is the generous landowner. You are at church. You are worshipping and serving God. You are the early morning worker who has worked all day. God gives you the agreed upon full days pay. Are you frustrated by the last minute worker who also gets full pay? The landowner is just. Everyone receives a full day’s pay. In giving extra to the late comers the landowner deprives you of nothing to which you are entitled. As far as justice there is no ground for complaint. The anger comes from envy, from wanting to earn the pay, from jealousy, from entitlement. Eternal life, God’s love, grace, redemption and blessings cannot be earned not even by a lifetime of worship and service. Indeed it cannot be bought at all; rather it can only be given. God is extravagantly generous, gracious, giving all more than we deserve or can even imagine. Amen