

Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” ... Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days. On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 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.

Text: Jonah 3:1-5, 10 SS 1/22/12 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 Mark 1:14-20 Psalm 19
Hymns: 243, 779, 281, 771

CONFRONT THE SIN, IN THE HOPE THAT THE SINNER WILL REPENT

Fellow redeemed in Christ,

When we see an unbeliever living in sin, is it your and my responsibility as Christians to say something to him about it? If we ‘lay down the law’ to such a person, have we done all we should? We know the story about Jonah who was inside the big fish. The Lord called Jonah to go and confront the people of Nineveh with their sin, and warn them of God’s judgment. The Lord used Jonah to bring many unbelievers to repentance. The Lord wants us to learn in our own witnessing to the unbelievers to **CONFRONT THE SINNER, IN THE HOPE THAT HE WILL REPENT.**

Our text begins, *“The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time. Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”* God had already told Jonah to go to Nineveh and tell the people to repent. But Jonah didn’t want to. As he told the Lord later, he knew that if the people of Nineveh repented God would forgive them. Nineveh was a city in Assyria, a powerful, proud, cruel nation that struck fear into the hearts of other nations (cf. the book of Nahum; & Is. 10:5-19). The Ninevites deserved to be punished, and Jonah didn’t think it would be fair for God to forgive them (Jon. 4:1-5). So, instead of going to Nineveh as God had told him to, Jonah got on a ship and tried to run away to the city of Tarshish. While he was at sea, God sent a storm. Jonah was thrown overboard, and God sent a great fish to swallow him and bring him to Nineveh. That’s how Jonah finally arrived where God had told him to go in the first place.

Being in the belly of the fish for three days gave Jonah time to think things over and tell God he was sorry. Jonah learned that we can’t run away from God, we can’t run away from things in life that we don’t want to face, and we can’t run away from our responsibility as Christians to confront sinners with their sin with the hope that God will lead them to repent and God can forgive them. This time when the Lord told Jonah to go deliver His message to the people of Nineveh, Jonah went.

We’re told, *“Now Nineveh was a very important city – a visit required three days.”* Jonah had his work cut out for him. There were more than 120,000 people in Nineveh (Jon. 4:11). It would take Jonah three days to walk through Nineveh and announce God’s warning to all the people.

“On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: ‘Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.’” Being human, Jonah probably wondered if the people

in Nineveh would ignore him, or make fun of him, or think he was some kind of ‘kook,’ or argue with him, or react violently against him. The message God had given Jonah to repeat over and over was Law. God left no room for discussion or excuses on the part of the Ninevites. They had been living in sin and defiance of God. They were guilty and needed to repent or God would destroy them.

As harsh a preaching of Law as God’s message was, it also held out hope. If God had only intended to destroy the people of Nineveh, He wouldn’t have sent Jonah to warn them. He would have simply destroyed them right away. Thus the threat of the Law was spoken so that the Ninevites could have the chance to repent and God could forgive them. There’s the Gospel. God says through His prophet Ezekiel, *“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!’”* (33:11)

Today’s society, with its wickedness and perversion and rebellion against God, demands that everyone approve of what they’re doing. Because we Christians can’t, we’re condemned as being intolerant. The Lord warns all who would defy Him, *“Do not be deceived”* (don’t fool yourselves), *“God is not mocked”* (we can’t defy God and make a mockery of His Word); *“for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life”* (Gal. 6:7-8). God loves everyone. God forgives everyone who is sorry for his sins and looks to Him for forgiveness. But God is also a just God. He punishes all who disobey Him and remain in their sin and unrepentance. God will send all unrepentant sinners to hell.

After Jonah delivered God’s warning, we’re told, *“The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”* It was a miracle! One person, Jonah, spoke to the 120,000+ citizens of Nineveh, AND THEY LISTENED! Jonah was a believer, and God was with him. Jonah didn’t have to, and he couldn’t, convince the Ninevites that they were sinners and God was going to punish them. Only God could convince them. Jonah’s responsibility as a child of God was to open his mouth and speak God’s Word. As the Lord had told Jonah, *“Proclaim to (Nineveh) the message I give you.”* GOD did the work through His Word, and changed the peoples’ heart.

The Ninevites *“declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.”* Instead of their regular clothes they wore sackcloth, which is a very rough material, like burlap. The book of Jonah tells us that the king of Nineveh himself joined the people in sackcloth and ashes (3:6-9). In this way they all expressed their sorrow to God, with the hope that He would not destroy them. *“And ... the (people) turned from their evil ways.”* The Ninevites weren’t just sorry that they had been caught. They were sincere in their repentance to God – in openly showing their sorrow over their sins, AND turning away from their sinful ways. Speaking of sincere repentance, God says in the first chapter of Isaiah, *“Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of My sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right!”* (vv. 16-17).

Where there is sin, God’s Law must be brought to bear. Scripture says, *“By the Law is the knowledge of sin”* (Ro. 3:20). Every one of us needs to hear the Law so it can show us our sin. If I don’t understand my own sinfulness before God, I can’t see my need for God to forgive me and save me. Jonah didn’t know how the people of Nineveh would receive what he had been sent to tell them. But it was GOD’S Word, not Jonah’s,

and it had to be delivered. Whether or not they WANTED to hear it, they desperately NEEDED to hear it to avoid God's punishment and receive His forgiveness instead.

The Lord cries out in His Word, *“Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil”* (Is. 5:20). How's that for a fitting description of the world today?! The corruption and perversion and rebelliousness against God in our society are sickening. We must confront sin for what it is. We must bring the full force of God's Law to bear, not watering down what the Bible says to make it more acceptable to people. A doctor can't put a Band-Aid on a broken arm just because it 'hurts too much' to set it right. Neither can you and I as Christians give someone a half-baked presentation of God's Law just because it 'hurts too much' for God's Word to set him straight.

“When God saw what the (Ninevites) did and how they turned from their evil ways, He had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction He had threatened.” Our calling as Christians is the same as Jonah's – to warn people of God's punishment for their sins in the hope that they'll repent and God can forgive them. When someone is doing wrong it's tempting for us to just come down hard on him with the Law and be done with him. But when a sinner repents, we need to speak the Gospel to him and assure him that God has forgiven him. Our hope and prayer is that people will take God's Law to heart and repent of their sins, and God will turn them to Him in faith.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (Jn. 3:16-17). If someone is unrepentant and chooses to remain in his defiance of God, he brings God's judgment upon himself. But when someone is sorry for his sins assure him that Jesus died for his sins on the cross. God has forgiven him. Scripture promises us, *“If we confess our sins, (God) is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 Jn. 1:9). Don't make the mistake Jonah almost did. We can't let our anger over someone's sins keep us from assuring him of God's forgiveness when he repents. Confront the sin, but always point the repentant sinner to the cross of Christ.

When we see an unbeliever living in sin, is it your and my responsibility as Christians to say something to him about it? The Lord didn't have Jonah preach to everyone he met. But where God sent Jonah, there Jonah spoke. If we're constantly preaching at people, we'll turn them off. Pray for wisdom to know when to speak and when to keep silent. When someone needs to hear God's Word, let the Law do its work to condemn the sinner of his sin, and let the Gospel do ITS work to comfort the repentant sinner with God's forgiveness and salvation in Christ. **CONFRONT THE SIN, IN THE HOPE THAT THE SINNER WILL REPENT.** Amen.