

Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city—a visit required three days.⁴ On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.”⁵ The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

⁶When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. ⁷Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh:

“By the decree of the king and his nobles:

Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.⁸ But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence.⁹ Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.”

¹⁰When 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. (NIV 84)

Theme: The Lord’s Word Always Produces Fruit

1. The preaching of the law convicts
2. The preaching of the gospel saves.

Do you hate your job? Many people do; and if you do, why is that? For many it may be the long hours or the hard commute. Others find their boss or their coworkers unbearable; or the problem is that the work is hard and is taking its toll on your body, or it’s stressful and is giving you other health problems. Or the job doesn’t pay good enough; or it’s not fun or enjoyable—for many, their jobs are just a way to pay the bills. What if you didn’t like the outcome or the result of your job? That is, what if the problem with your job wasn’t any of those things, but your problem was what would happen if you did your job. It might be hard for us to think of an example, but I suppose if you were forced to work at an abortion clinic you wouldn’t like the outcome of doing your job.

In a way, that is the situation in which the Prophet Jonah found himself. He didn’t want to do his job of spreading God’s Word because he knew that if he would, it would produce fruit—for the preaching of the law convicts and the preaching of the gospel saves.

At the beginning of this book God told Jonah, **go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.** Nineveh was the leading city of Assyria—a country north of Israel. Nineveh was a wicked and adulterous place. In his book, the prophet Nahum, lists the sins of Nineveh. They include plotting evil against the Lord, prostitution, witchcraft, and cruelty. Jonah and the other Israelites knew Assyria well—they were staunch enemies. God telling Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh would be like God telling an American Pastor today to go and preach in Mecca or to ISIS’s headquarters in Mosul Iraq—which coincidentally is essentially in the same spot as ancient Nineveh.

So it’s no surprise that Jonah didn’t want to go. It’s not that he hated his job—he was a prophet, the Lord gave him the very words to speak to the people on his behalf. What Job didn’t like was the outcome of his job. If he were to preach God’s Word to Nineveh, Jonah knew that they would repent and believe in the Lord—and that God would forgive them. And he couldn’t have that—they weren’t worthy to hear the gospel; they weren’t worthy to be forgiven. So instead of going Northeast by land to Nineveh, Jonah got on a boat and traveled to Tarshish—either North in Asia Minor or west in Spain.

So God sent a storm on the Mediterranean Sea and Jonah led the fellow ship-goers to throw him overboard. The storm stopped, but Jonah was swallowed by a large fish and there in the belly of the fish he spent three days and three nights. He prayed to the Lord and confessed his sins; and God made the fish spit Jonah out on dry land. Then we get our text for today when God, for a second time, told Jonah to go and preach to Nineveh.

Jonah knew full well that God’s Word is living and active; Jonah knew that God’s Word never returns to him empty. That’s precisely why Jonah didn’t want to go—he didn’t want the people of Nineveh to repent and be forgiven. We too may think the same thing—we all know people who haven’t lived the best of lives, or those who have rejected the gospel over and over again. We look down upon them and

don't think they are worthy to hear the gospel, to step foot in our church, or to be associated with Christians in anyway. "It's not fair," we may be complain to God like the Father of the prodigal son, "I've been faithful all my life and have always strived to obey your commands; and this is a wicked person who sins against you again and again—and you are going to forgive him?"

But we might hesitate a different reason. The law can be harsh; it's not the easiest thing to do to tell someone that the way they are living their life is contrary to God's will and that they will suffer forever unless they repent and turn from their sinful ways. We are afraid how someone might act; or how offended they might be. So we hesitate to share God's Word with them, specifically the law. We don't want to appear judgmental; but loving. And we face a big temptation to change our message or at least downplay God's law, to open things up a little bit and not be so old fashioned that way we don't appear to be so discriminatory or hateful—to allow things that churches may not have allowed in the past so that we can be more accepting of others in these changing times. And we try to justify it by saying, we simply don't want to "turn anyone off" to the gospel.

But it's not loving to withhold the full extent of God's law from others. If we won't warn them of the impending eternal death that awaits all who don't repent from any sin; then who will? What would have happened if no one preached to Nineveh as God wanted? Look at what happened when Jonah finally got around to sharing God's message to them. His message of, **Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned**, is of course, just a summary of the more complete message he would have preached to them. And they all repented—from the greatest of them to the least, they all repented of their wickedness and put on sackcloth—a sign of mourning. The king too—when he heard this message repented and demanded that the rest of his country mourn over their sins with him in hopes that God may relent from his wrath and not bring upon them the destruction which he warned them about.

The bottom line is this: God's Word works; the law convicts hearts—it shows us our sin and our need of a Savior. Because the labor of the Lord is never in vain we don't hesitate to preach that law to others without holding back or downplaying its seriousness.

But the law better not be the only message we share with others—there is also the gospel. If, after convicting hearts with the law, we fail to share the gospel, we haven't done our job as Christians. The gospel is the good news of salvation by grace alone—after you have shown them their sin and need of a Savior, you can point them to the world's Savior, Jesus Christ!

But just think about the message of the gospel for a second, in the eyes of an unbeliever; it hinges on love—that God would send his one and only son (who is both God and man) to suffer and die on this earth to save his enemies who constantly rebelled against him. The gospel depends on Jesus Christ willingly suffering and dying on a cross because he knew he would rise from the dead three days later. And this is just one of his many miracles that he did throughout his life. And conveniently Jesus rose into heaven in the clouds so we can't see him anymore; but at any time he will return in the clouds to judge the living and the dead and to destroy the world.

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, Paul says in 1 Corinthians. The whole thing is absurd—from his conception and birth, to the fact that he rose from the dead; from God willingly sending his Son to die, to Jesus being both God and man. It's offensive to reason; the whole thing is foolishness in their minds. So like Jonah, we too may hesitate to share the gospel with others because they aren't going to listen any way. We all know people who have no interest in God and his Word—they hate Christ and they hate his religion. They don't want anything to do with them, so why bother wasting your time by trying to share the word with them? It's like going over to the Middle East and preaching over there—it won't work.

But again, that's the exact opposite reason as to why Jonah hesitated—he knew that the Word works, that it always produces fruit. We saw the power of the Word in our text for today. We may not be exactly sure what message Jonah shared with the people of Nineveh. God did tell him to preach against the city and we know he preached a message of repentance. But we are also told that they believed God—they believed his warning, but they also believed in him.

In Matthew 12 Jesus is condemning the unbelieving Jews of his day when he said, **The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here.**

Jonah must have shared the gospel with the people of Nineveh, otherwise they never would have repented and believed; and they wouldn't be in heaven right now!

Again the bottom line is that the Word works, and always produces fruit! This was a horrible and wicked city. They didn't know God or knew nothing of him. They plotted evil; they were cruel and violent. And yet at the preaching of the Word, they repented and believed in God. That is the power of the Word. That is like the entire city of Mecca or Mosul repenting and believing the Lord!

The people of Nineveh produced fruit in keeping with their repentance. They repented of their sin—believing God. And they turned from their wickedness—at least for a while. Just as we are exactly sure what they heard from Jonah and believed; we aren't exactly sure how long this repentance and faith lasted. We do know it didn't last long. It wasn't too long after Jonah—perhaps 40 years or so, that the Assyrians attacked and completely destroyed the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. The people of Nineveh did not remain the Word; they lost their faith and returned to their wicked ways.

There are some people who don't like their jobs. Jonah didn't want to do his because he knew that the Word works. As Christians it is the duty and responsibility of each and every one of us to do as Jonah did—to share the word—both law and gospel to everyone. You may not like what you do for a living, but sharing the Word is something that you willingly do.

Because the Word works—it always produces fruit. It worked on the people of Nineveh and it worked on you. So we do all we can to share that Word with others—not holding back on the law and freely proclaiming the good news of the gospel. So that people may repent, turning to the Lord and believing. And because the word works we do all we can to keep them and ourselves in the Word so that we may continue to see our sin and need for a Savior and be comforted by the loving grace of God in our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.