If we think God’s mercy and grace is our right, we expose our sinful pride which makes more of our own freedom and so little of God’s. We feel it is our right to be free to choose or reject God, but we do not feel that He should be free to choose or to reject us. If God were under an obligation to save everyone, God would no longer be God, because a law higher than God would bind His actions; and mercy would no longer be mercy because it was something required and not something freely given.

The Biblical defense of the justice of God is not that God gives everyone an equal opportunity to be saved. It is that God is under no obligation to save anyone, because God is free to do whatever pleases God; but that when He does save, He always does so on the basis of absolute justice, drawing sinners through faith, into union with Christ, who died for the forgiveness of sin (Rom. 3:23-25).

The obvious conclusion to all this is that salvation does not depend on our desire or efforts, but on God’s mercy alone (Rom. 9:16). We are saved, not because we had the desire to be saved, or because we made an effort to be saved, or because we did something to convince God of our worthiness, but because God chose to save us by intervening in our lives, moving us through faith and repentance and into new life with Christ.

Too often we settle for a lesser form of grace in which God opens the door of salvation without doing anything to bring us inside. This kind of grace makes God less and makes us more. If treats all people the same, and if salvation rested ultimately on our response to God’s offer, then we would be able to save ourselves by being smart enough to recognize a good deal and wise enough to take advantage of it. We would be saved by making a better choice than the person who didn’t accept God’s offer. Notice how grace just disappeared.

But it’s actually worse than that: if God opened the door of salvation and then stood back, leaving the response up to us, nobody would be saved. Grace that opens a door and then awaits our response leaves everybody outside. This lesser grace is simply not big enough to address our human problem.

Jonah understood God’s grace. He knew that God brought the people of Nineveh to repentance, not through a general offer of salvation but through a specific intervention in their lives. God could easily have left them under the judgment they so richly deserved. Instead, God sent His Word. Even then, when Jonah preached God’s Word, God could have allowed nature to take its course. Left to themselves, the Ninevites might have rejected the Word, and Jonah’s preaching would have confirmed them in their sin. But God sent God’s Spirit to work in their hearts, producing repentance and bringing new life.

No one and no thing forced God to do this. He did it freely, and that’s what bothered Jonah the most. The more Jonah thought about God’s grace, the more God’s grace angered Jonah, and Jonah’s anger undermined his own repentance. Jonah felt compelled to explain *why* he refused God’s call to preach in Nineveh. **“**O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. Jonah anticipated God’s grace towards the people of Nineveh and that is why he was so quick to flee to Tarshish.

As soon as we start explaining why we sinned, we undermine our own repentance. Deep in our soul there is a struggle between repentance and self-justification. Repentance says: “I did this. I’m sorry, and I ask forgiveness.” Self-justification says: “You need to understand the reasons why I did this.” The explanation undermines genuine repentance. In pursuing the path of self-justification, Jonah shifted the blame for his sin onto God, and that was the root of his anger. “I went to Tarshish, which I knew was wrong, but actually, God, it was Your fault! If You judged the wicked like You should, there wouldn’t be a problem. But I know you are a God who relents from sending calamity, and that’s why I ran away.” Explaining sin undermines repentance and leads to anger with God. Fortunately, it doesn’t end there.

In response to Jonah, God raises the issue of rights. God asked Jonah: “Have you any right to be angry?” (4:4). Jonah had a problem with God’s justice; God had a problem with Jonah’s injustice. God stepped into Jonah’s life in an extraordinary way, with the purpose and effect of saving Jonah. God owed Jonah exactly nothing, but acted freely out of God’s own will. God exercised God’s freedom to shower mercy on Jonah and save him from destruction. And then God chose to show the same mercy to the people of Nineveh. So what was the basis of Jonah’s complaint? Do we have any right to be angry with how God dispenses grace?

No, we don’t, but sometimes we get angry about God’s grace because it seems to make His love less. We feel that a God who says, “Jacob I loved…Esau I hated,” seems less loving than a God who says, “I love Jacob and I love Esau, too.” If God is love, shouldn’t God treat all people the same?

Again, the answer is “no.” A love that treats everyone the same is a very weak kind of love. Let me give you an example: I love my wife. That means I treat nobody else the way I treat her! As a good husband, I do not love all women equally. The strength of my love lies in the fact that it is unique to my wife. My wife should feel loved because I sought her out and because I love her like no other. The strongest kind of love is not a general benevolence, but a passion for the good of a particular person.

The truth is that God does love each of us in that way. God’s passion is for your particular good. We know this to be true because, in grace, God intercepting our lives in unique and special ways, and drawing us to faith in Christ. If you are in Christ, God did more than merely open the door of salvation for you; God ushered you in, introduced you to Christ, and gave you the grace which leads to salvation. The fact that God chooses to offer that same kind of love to other people – even people we deem unworthy – does not diminish His particular love for us.

Accepting God’s grace in your own life, means accepting that God offers His grace to others as well. We may never know why God chooses the people He chooses. For that matter, we may not know why God chose to extend grace to us either, except that He does. Why did God set His love on us? The nearest we get to an answer is that God loves His people…because God loves them. “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other people…But it was because the LORD loved you” (Deut. 7:7-8). Period! End of story. God loves you, because God loves you.

The more you see of God’s grace, the more marvelous and mysterious it will seem to you. As you are taken up with the wonder of His redeeming love in your life, you will discover a growing joy in your heart and a deepening desire to pursue a God-centered life. Grasping a compelling, biblical vision of the sovereign grace and goodness of God will lift you out of the shallow water of self-interest and lead you into the pursuit of a God-centered life.

Prayer: God, I have come seeking your Grace: deep within my being, deep in my heart where justice, truth, love and peace abide; in the midst of my daily activities and the many things-to-do that keep me going; in the successes and disappointments of my daily activities; in the books I read, in the news I hear, in the noise of the surroundings; in the truth I discover, in the uncertainties I encounter; in the wonderful people and in the not so wonderful people whom I meet. May your grace abound in my life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Sources:

* Colin Smith, *Jonah: Navigating a God-Centered Life*. Bell & Bain: Glasgow. 2012.
* [www.christianfocus.com](http://www.christianfocus.com/)**. “**[Anywhere but Nineveh: A Month’s Journey with Jonah](http://christianfocus.com/item/show/1838/-/sr_1).**” © 2016 by Frank Sellar.**
* <http://www.crosswalk.com/faith/prayer/a-prayer-for-a-gracious-and-compassionate-god.html>

**Affirm God’s Grace (Part II)**

Sunday, July 30, 2017 Jonah 3:10-4:5

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

It has been suggested that in Chapter One [Jonah](http://biblestudytools.com/bible-stories/jonah-and-the-whale.html) runs from God. In Chapter Two, Jonah runs into God. In Chapter Three, Jonah runs with God, and in Chapter Four, Jonah tries to run God! In this prayer, Jonah is telling God what to do. Jonah says to God, “I knew this was going to happen!” It sounds so astonishing! Prayer can be a funny thing if we are the ones telling God what God really ought to do and what not to do.

Jonah prays a really selfish, angry prayer. See how many times ‘”I”, “me” and “my” appear in this outpouring! While Jonah does indeed pray here in Nineveh, it’s not in order to develop a relationship of love and humility and trust, but to scold God! It’s just as well the Lord is indeed gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love! Like a patient parent, God lets Jonah rant. God, who is kind, merciful and forgiving, wants Jonah to grow in grace and knowledge and love, so God lets Jonah speak his mind before answering.

Last week, we talked about God’s grace. We said that grace means that God steps into the lives of particular individuals with the purpose and effect of saving them. We noted that God does not need our permission to do this; in fact, if God did not seek us out, it is unlikely we would seek God out, and thus, we would miss the saving grace God offers. Here’s the final piece about God’s grace: God is under no obligation to do this.

Few people would object to the idea of God stepping into people’s lives in order to save them. The problem comes when God does this in the lives of some, but not in the lives of all. Grace says, “Jacob I loved…Esau I hated” (Rom. 9:13). These six words cause massive anxiety for many people, but their meaning is really quite clear. God is absolutely free to go after Jacob and save him, but God is under no obligation to do the same for Esau. That’s a tough thing to say and to hear, isn’t it? Our first instinct is to say to God, “It’s fine for You to love Jacob, but You have to love Esau as well.” Loving Jacob and not loving Esau seems unfair.

The apostle Paul tackled this problem head on: “What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For [God] says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom. 9:14-15). God reserves the right to decide where, when and on whom God will have mercy. Grace is God’s business, not ours. We have no inherent claim to God’s mercy. Mercy is God’s gift; it is not our right.