

Truth or Consequences?

Jonah 1:1-15

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January 30, 2010 – Morning Sermon

I'd like to take a look at Jonah 1:1-15 which says

1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." 3 But Jonah rose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish. So he paid the fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the LORD. 4 But the LORD hurled a great wind upon the sea, and there was a mighty tempest on the sea, so that the ship threatened to break up. 5 Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried out to his god. And they hurled the cargo that was in the ship into the sea to lighten it for them. But Jonah had gone down into the inner part of the ship and had lain down and was fast asleep. 6 So the captain came and said to him, "What do you mean, you sleeper? Arise, call out to your god! Perhaps the god will give a thought to us, that we may not perish." 7 And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. 8 Then they said to him, "Tell us on whose account this evil has come upon us. What is your occupation? And where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?" 9 And he said to them, "I am a Hebrew, and I fear the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land." 10 Then the men were exceedingly afraid and said to him, "What is this that you have done!" For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD, because he had told them. 11 Then they said to him, "What shall we do to you, that the sea may quiet down for us?" For the sea grew more and more tempestuous. 12 He said to them, "Pick me up and hurl me into the sea; then the sea will quiet down for you, for I know it is because of me that this great tempest has come upon you." 13 Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to get back to dry land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more tempestuous against them. 14 Therefore they called out to the LORD, "O LORD, let us not perish for this man's life, and lay not on us innocent blood, for you, O LORD, have done as it pleased you." 15 So

they picked up Jonah and hurled him into the sea, and the sea ceased from its raging.

For a number of years we have been hearing and living with the results of the claim by some philosophically that there is no such thing as objective truth - that there is no right that is predictable and perpetual and that there is no wrong in the same way. We do not believe that from the Biblical perspective and so I think it is time for us to remind ourselves of how dangerous that position is because even though we don't believe it as true Christians, there is a strong sense in which we can be effected by it so that maybe we will not accept it fully but we will compromise our positions, our expressions and our stands in some places. So with that in mind and the preparation for us to learn caution and better practice where these things are concerned, I want to ask you several questions in preparation for treating this further in a few minutes.

These are the questions. Would you place your hand on an obviously hot stove burner? Would you pick up a rattle snake without using protective devices or protective coverings? Would you jump into a body of water even though you had been warned that there were dangerous rocks just out of sight underneath the surface of the water? If you did place your hand on a hot burner would you offensively resent the resulting pain and damage? If you did pick up a rattle snake would you defensively claim that you didn't deserve the natural consequences which would flow from such an action? Finally if you did reject the warning and stubbornly jump into rocky waters would you attempt to shift blame for the results to someone else for not being clear enough in their initial explanation?

While we tend to think that such examples are so unrealistic as to be ignored because of their silliness, they are in fact silly in a sense, but they also are descriptive to the degree to which can and sometimes do set aside true reason in order to pursue our own personal preference. Let's understand that this whole idea of the claim that there is no objective truth is among other things for the purpose of having liberty or permission to do what we want to do and hopefully not have to pay the consequences. The sermon I want to present to you is just that - truth or consequences. The "true truths" of the Word of God in which "true truths" is a phrase or expression that a gentleman used a number of years ago in his philosophical teaching throughout this country and other places of the world. "True truths" is referring to the Word of God. It is referring to the fact that the Word of God is just that. It is always that and it is never less than that or more than that. Someone has written something I want to read to you that will continue to set the stage for our considerations. "Even Christians are susceptible to the enticing though dreadfully wrong temptation to follow our own preferences instead of heeding the fact that objective truth is an actual reality. The propaganda of those who claim there is no such thing as objective truth is hypocritical because those who promote this claim don't and in fact can't live out

their claim. For example, monetary standards, contractual standards and laws of nature do not yield to the “would be” relativism of those who claim that it is so.”

An example of that would be that maybe I owe someone a hundred dollars and go to pay them the bill. They give me the bill that says one hundred dollars owed and I take out of my wallet or a check that I have written and I either give them a ten dollar bill or a check in the amount of ten dollars and I hand it to them. They say to me, “You don’t understand. The bill is one hundred dollars.” I would say to them, “Well, to me this is one hundred dollars.” How far would I get? I wouldn’t get very far. If I did get very far I will pass on to you where that place is.

No, in such issues and categories of life we do live by standards. We do live by strict measurements. We do live by objectivity and I dare say we would not want to toy around with the laws of gravity. We would not want to violate or not pay attention to the laws of aerodynamics. We would also not want to enter into a contract with somebody on such a “wishy washy” basis as truth is what it is to you and truth is what it is to me and we’ll just try to manage the contract some way to an understanding as to what the contract says. We wouldn’t do that nor may we look at the truth of the Word of God as believers and try to make it what we want it to be.

While it is true that we who belong to Jesus Christ will never have to live under the condemning judgment of our sin because of the work of Christ that is we will go to heaven and we will have the confidence of the forgiveness and cleansing of Christ in this life, we know He has taken our punishment and our condemnation for us. While we know that it is also true nevertheless that God will either allow and in some cases will customize natural consequences for our failing to obey His objective truth. For instance, if I was to be so silly as to lay my hand on an obviously hot stove burner He will not keep me from being burned.

Now take that and expand it into the applications of conduct that violates the standards of the will of God. I won’t try to list any of these standards because if I don’t list the one that’s close to you, you may think you’re exempt. But just take any standard that God says He requires of you even in the Christian life. If you flying in the face of God violate or ignore that standard there will be natural consequences that will far more than likely result from that action. God is not going to deliver you from those natural consequences. You won’t suffer hell and you have the hope, the assurance and the forgiveness we have on the basis of the sacrificial atoning work of Jesus Christ but if I become an alcoholic I’m going to pay the price of an alcoholic. If I commit adultery against the Lord and my wife I’m going to pay the results and many others will be caught up in the ramifications of the natural consequences of that kind of conduct and activity. So you understand what I mean. The Lord will not deliver us from the natural consequences of violating the standards that He has given to us. There will always be those natural consequences.

There will also be at times, and this is not always true and I don't understand why sometimes it is so and sometimes it is not, but that's the matter for God. Sometimes He will even customize consequences in order to drive us back into intimacy with Himself. That is what is referred to for instance in Hebrews 12:7-11 when it says

7 It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? 8 If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. 9 Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? 10 For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. 11 For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

What does that have to do with the passage in Jonah we just read? We see at least three consequences of Jonah's violation of the requirement, the truth, the standard of God placed on Him. I want to point out these three consequences and see the ramifications of them and how they moved into the lives of other people than just Jonah and learn the point we're making here that objective truth is a reality, it is given by God, natural consequences and sometimes customized consequences result from our disobedience to the Word of God. Then in the end we want to see how we can respond rightly by the grace of the One who has saved us and in His power will give us all that we need to love Him and follow Him in the sanctification process.

Take a look at this passage in Jonah 1:1-2 which says, *1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me."* Jonah instantly decided that he didn't want to do that. Why would he take such a position? The reason was the Ninevites were the enemies of the Israelites. Not only were they military enemies as far as that kind of threat but there was absolutely no love lost between those two groups of people. So, seemingly there were no second thoughts, no consideration that is the Scripture doesn't give it to us, that Jonah seemingly decided that "no, I'm not only not going to Nineveh but I'm going to go in the opposite direction and go to Tarshish."

If you need a geography lesson just briefly here, if he had gone to Nineveh it would have been from your perspective on the map down toward the southeast but he went west and was headed for Spain, a thousand miles away. Tarshish was on the coast of Spain. So Jonah was pretty emphatic in what he did not want to do and what he planned to do in order to keep from doing what the Lord wanted Him to do. So I call first of all the truth of God in the standard, the command that He had given, the comparison between that truth and the storm

that was caused by God due to Jonah's disobedience. The Scripture is very descriptive here. It says that when Jonah got on board this ship to go to Tarshish the Lord hurled a storm onto the sea. The interesting thing to me is that storm didn't just affect Jonah. It affected everybody that was on board the ship and it affected them to such a degree that it's easy to see in the passage that they were scared. These were seasoned seamen. This must have been some storm because they now believed that they would not live through this. They began crying and praying and I don't know how much that would have been characteristic of seamen of that day but I do know that there is such a thing as foxhole religion. It has to be pretty life threatening when the seasoned seamen begin to cry out to God and to advise everybody else to do the same so that they can live through this.

That storm affected everybody else initially more than it did Jonah. It did affect Jonah and I'll show you how in just moment but the reality is, one man's disobedience caused stormy circumstances in the lives of everybody on board the ship. The same can be true in our own decision to go contrary to the will of God. It is very seldom that overt disobedience is not shared in its results unhappily by others that are related to the life of the disobedient one.

An illustration of another place where this is dealt with is the story of Achan, the account of Achan. Many of you I'm sure are familiar with that but let me just rehearse it briefly in order to indelibilize this point in our minds. The instructions going into the battle of Jericho was 'don't take any loot because its going to be devoted for certain purposes. Do not take it and make it your own.' Achan couldn't stand it. He saw gold bars, silver bars and bolts of cloth and thought to himself, "What a waste. I'm just going to take a little of this, sneak it home and bury it underneath my tent and when this is history and the pressure is off, I'll just take it and use it and somebody will get some good out of this beyond whatever else it is they plan to do with it."

The next battle that Israel was to fight should have been a push over. It was a little bitty old place called Ai and Ai defeated the army of Israel. We are not told how they were defeated but they were defeated. Joshua was just puzzled. He just couldn't figure it out. He comes before God and asks God "What in the world is going on?" God says there is sin in the camp. Now right there, the lesson is clear. When God said there was sin in the camp and the fact that Ai had defeated the army of Israel that's a pretty serious situation but God goes on and gives a way that Joshua can look through the people of Israel and find out who it is and Achan was called before the people. He was charged by Joshua to admit what he had done and he did so. He admitted what he did, his wrong, and said "It's hidden underneath my tent" but he didn't stop there. As you know in order to show the severity of not paying any attention to the command of the Lord, Joshua then called for the death of Achan, the death of his family, the death of all of his livestock and then the burning of all them and it out of existence.

You may say “That’s pretty severe.” Yes it is pretty severe but it’s one of those places in the Old Testament that sobers us as to the reality of standards and the reality that God does not take lightly being ignored when He gives a command. So we see that one person caused the storm in the life of everybody on the ship, just as one man’s disobedience caused the defeat of the army of Israel and the destruction of himself, his family and everything that he owned. It was the consequence of that kind of storminess. Secondly, then there is the consequence we’ll compare like this. The truth of the standard of God as to how he should conduct his ministry – go to Nineveh, preach and cry against it – but he says “No, I’m going to Tarshish” and then what did he have to do? He had to admit before people that would be embarrassing for him to do so, he had to admit under a strong questioning that he was in fact violating that standard of his God. You remember the situation. The captain says “Everybody pray. Everybody row hard to get back to land.” Perhaps another guy said “Where’s that guy that went down below.” “Yeah, he’s down there and he’s asleep.” I think Jonah was trying to forget the reality of his rebellion. That’s just my opinion and you can take it for what it’s worth. I think he was trying to sleep through his knowing that he was running contrary to the will of God. They went down and woke him up. They shook him and interrogated him saying “Who are you? Where are you from? Where are you going? Why this and what that?” Jonah responded, “I am a Hebrew and I fear the Lord God.” I have a suspicion he feared the Lord more at this moment than he had when he entered the boat or boarded the boat. They kept after him and here’s the point. Here was a servant of God. He was a servant of a God with a huge reputation that people of the known world of that day knew about the God of Israel. Now Jonah was having to admit that he was delinquent. He was having to confess disobedience to his faithfulness to the standards of God as far as the ministry that he had been called on to conduct. In Psalm 69 there is something interesting where this is concerned. Psalm 69:6 says “*Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel.*” That is what was going on in Jonah’s situation. That has happened obviously down through history not only of the Old Testament people of God but the New Testament people of God. There have been any number maybe hundreds maybe thousands of moral failures, things that have given a black eye to the reputation and integrity of the church because of the failure of the people who belong to the Lord in ministry and who failed to live up to the standard that God had for them. I’ll give you something of a lighter illustration of that.

I grew up under a very Godly man who was the pastor of the congregation in my home town of French Camp. He was red headed so that may explain a little bit of what I’m about to describe to you but this happened in the late 50s maybe early 60s in the days before there was either predictable air conditioning in cars and before pressurized radiators. This pastor did lots of preaching in other places. He did evangelistic preaching and he was on his way to an appointment on one particular Sunday. It was summertime and it was hot. The radiator in his car boiled over. He pulled into a service station and it was unusual in those days that

there would be one to be opened but this one was and he was glad because he needed attention to his car. His temper was not the coolest. He was irritated, short and impatient with this service station attendant. The service station attendant finished what he needed to do to get the car back on the road and the pastor handed him a credit card to pay for the services. The pastor noticed as he handed it to him that it said "Reverend Mr. So and So" on his credit card. The pastor realized with a crushing realization that he had just destroyed any possibility to have any constructive spiritual effect in that man's life by the way he had acted.

You can multiply that by multiples. You can look at me and I have failed the Lord in situations like that and maybe probably you have too but what Jonah had to do was come out right before the world, so to speak, and say "I've done this and I'm wrong in this." Then they asked Jonah the question "What are we going to do to settle this storm?" That leads to the third of these consequences. First was the consequence of the storm that was caused by his disobedience. Second was the consequence of his embarrassment, shame, causing shame to the ministry, and causing difficulty to minister to the people at all because of his own hypocrisy, inconsistency and bad conduct.

The third thing is the consequence of potential loss of ministry on a permanent basis. Now that is stretching it a little bit and I'll tell you why. Let me just set the scene again. Here's Jonah who has been interrogated. He has confessed and they have asked him what needs to be done to get rid of this storm. He has answered honestly by saying, "The only thing you can do is throw me overboard" and they don't want to do that because they understand the value of human life. They understood too that they were tampering here with a prophet of God and it wasn't Jonah they were concerned about but it was God they were concerned about. So they tried hard to row back to shore. You'll notice in the passage that several times it says that the storm was increasingly tempestuous against them. Finally they just had to give up. They prayed, "Lord, we don't want You to hold us accountable for this man's life but he has told us that the only thing that will save our lives is to throw him overboard." So one got at his hands and one at his feet and they threw him into the water.

The reason I say the threat of the loss of ministry permanently is because of what I surmise was going through Jonah's mind. If you were Jonah in that situation what would have been going through your mind? I think and this is just my opinion but I think it's reasonable that he was thinking something like this. "Why did I not go to Nineveh?" As the waters began to enfold him and as we're told in other places the seaweed began to wrap around him. He didn't know that God had a great fish that was about to swallow him and he didn't know that he was about to engage in one of the richest prayers of confession and repentance, second only to Psalm 51 in all of the Scripture. From his perspective it was over. "Why didn't I go to Nineveh?" God has cast him aside. Now while that was not the case, it has been the case in many occasions. In fact, one of the central

points of the paradigm of our Church Revitalization Ministry is based on Revelation 2 in the letter to the church at Ephesus. Revelation 2:4-5 says *4 But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first (that is the love for Him). 5 Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.* What does that mean? In Revelation 1 lampstand is a symbolic term for the effectiveness of ministry in the local congregations. So what Jesus was telling John to tell the people at Ephesus was unless you recover your first love (remembering, repenting and recovering) I'm going to take away the effectiveness of your church. I'm going to take away your ministry. I have to admit to you that, that haunted me for years during the pastoral ministry that I had at a church before coming here for a good number of years in Florida. I would on occasion say "What if I'm doing the same thing this week as I did last week or the same thing I did this month as I did last month or the same thing this year as I did last year" and just going through the treadmill, while doing some creative things here and there but with Ichabod written across the door of the church. Do I love the Lord the way I should? Do I call on these people to be intimate with Him, filled with love for and commitment to and surrender to Him? Am I eager in worship, adoration and praise to Him? We can tell that by how we take advantage of the means of grace. We can tell that by how we learn and respond to the instruction of the Word of God and enjoy the confidence and the peace that He gives us in our heart.

What is sanctification? Sanctification is the evidence that saving grace is actually present but there are times when we forget sanctification and threat that faced those people in Ephesus was unless they recovered that real worshipful love for the Lord they would lose the effectiveness of their church. I think that was what Jonah was thinking has happened to him. He had been so hard headed and belligerent. He had had an idea that he thought was so much better than the one God had. He didn't want the people of Nineveh forgiven. He didn't want them to repent. He didn't want God to be gracious to them. If God did that they would remain a threat militarily and there would be all of the continued complications between those two peoples that had been up to that point. So Jonah says "no, I'm not." Jonah caused the storm. He had to admit unfaithfulness and the shame of that as we have seen in our own New Testament age and Old Testament period as well in so many cases. And as he fell into the water he thought "I'm done. It's over" and we look at passages such as the one in Revelation 2 and we see where that has actually happened and where God says He will do just that. Now the church at Ephesus was revived but then they got in trouble again and the Lord did take away their lampstand. That church is no longer there. That church is out of existence. Did you know that we close in this country, after all church planting is done, a net number between 3,500 and 4,000 churches a year? The lampstands do get taken away. Individuals can lose ministry because of lack of personal love for the Lord Jesus Christ. So these consequences are not just theoretical. There are objective standards by God and God does treat seriously our tampering with those standards. If we put our hand on the hot

burner it will burn. If we pick up a rattle snack, figuratively speaking, we will get bit. If we jump into rock strum waters carelessly we bear the results. So what then do we say? I'm glad I don't have to stop here. I'm nearly done but I don't have to stop until I get to a happier position.

Philippians 4:13 says "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." If I recognize, remember and conduct my life against the backdrop of the reality of the objective truth of God and if I keep in mind that He will let natural consequences flow out of disobedient actions and sometimes He will customize things to draw me back into intimacy with Himself, I can fly to Christ and I can say "You are my salvation. You are the One who atoned for my sins. You are the One who wrote that we did not have to live under the bondage of sin any longer in Romans 6."

He also wrote through the Apostle Paul are larger section but I'll just give you one part of it. He is the One who gave Himself to redeem us. What is redemption? Redemption is not just salvation in general. It's a particular part of a salvation process. It is the payment of a ransom to liberate us out of bondage and captivity into the freedom of function in intimacy with Christ. That's what redemption is. It is called in another place in Scripture 'abundant' redemption because we have abundant ability summarized in Philippians 4:13. I can do all things through Christ, through Christ, through Christ who strengthens me.

So by taking advantage of the means of grace, Scripture, prayer and other means of grace we can be built up, strengthened, grow in our love for Him, enjoy the redemption, the freedom, the liberty from the bondage and dominance of sin in our life and we can acknowledge in reality that yes there are objective standards but we can also live in the liberty, confidence, peace and joy of the redemption that Jesus bought and paid for you and me. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, we ask You to give each of us a serious look at ourselves so that we might recognize areas where we have a tendency to follow our personal preference rather than treating seriously the objective standards of Your truth. We thank You Lord Jesus so very much that You are our salvation, our forgiveness, our liberty and You have given us not only salvation but You have given us the ability to grow in the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in our lives through the use of the means of grace. So protect us from compromising this rich inheritance we have in Christ, compromising that by wanting to pursue personal preference and violating some standard of Yours. Help us to realize that You will allow these consequences and You will in some cases customize consequences to draw us back into intimacy with Yourself and so dear Lord cause us to look thankfully and worshipfully and lovingly and faithfully to You, remembering that in Christ we can do all things that we need to do. May we make rich and wonderful progress in doing so, we ask in Jesus' Name, Amen.

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