

True Repentance

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Preacher: Matthew Capone

[0 : 00] Hey, good morning, church. My name is Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church. And it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

As we begin, I just want to remind you of a couple things. First of all, if you're new here, welcome. We're glad that you're with us. We'd love for you to go to our website, www.cmpca.net.

And there will be a pop-up as soon as you go there for a visitor form. And that's a chance for you to give us some more information about yourself so that we can connect with you. For everyone, I'll remind you that we have a prayer meeting coming up this Saturday, May the 9th at 9 a.m.

And as those of you who attended the last one know, that was just a sweet time of fellowship with one another and with the Lord. And we'd love to see as many of you as possible this Saturday. Details for that are on our website.

And, of course, it's always in our Friday email as well. If you're not on our Friday email list, you can find that at the bottom right of every page of our website. For everyone, whether you're new with us or you've been a member of our community for a while, I'll remind you again that while you can see me, I can't necessarily see you.

[1 : 08] And we can see numbers, but we often can't see names. So I'd encourage you at this time to make a comment in the comments section of Facebook. You can just simply say something like, good morning, everyone, or glad to be here, share who's with you and where you're watching from.

And that'll do two things. First of all, it will give us a small sense of being together, even as we're separated. And it will also allow us just to know who's here and with us.

With that, we are continuing in the book of Jonah. And you'll remember that the book of Jonah is not a book about a fish. The fish only appears four times in three verses.

But instead, the book of Jonah tells the story of a man named Jonah who was a prophet who lived in the 9th or 8th century B.C. and was commanded by God to go to Nineveh, which is in modern-day northern Iraq, and was in the kingdom of Assyria, an enemy of the people of Israel, to pronounce God's judgment.

Even more than a story about Jonah, however, it's a story about God's mercy. And so we've been tracking with that. In chapter 1, we saw that God shows mercy to people we wouldn't show mercy to, people like Nineveh.

[2 : 15] And it's offensive that he shows mercy because he shows mercy to people like you and me, which highlights that everyone is in desperate need of God's grace. Last week in Jonah chapter 2, we asked a question about how God responds in his mercy when people run away from him.

And we saw that when God's people flee from him, God pursues them. He pursues them in their circumstances, and he uses it to return them to him. This week, we're going to continue to look at God's mercy in Jonah chapter 3, and we're going to ask a different question about it, which is this.

How do we take hold of and experience God's mercy? How do we take hold of and experience God's mercy? Who is it that receives God's mercy? Is it good people?

Is it people for whom their good in their life outweighs the bad? Is God's mercy for anyone who calls himself a Christian and has had some interaction with Jesus and his teachings in the past?

Is God's mercy for everyone, for everyone who's alive in this world? Who is it that receives God's mercy? How is it that we can experience God's mercy? That's what we're going to be looking at in Jonah chapter 3.

[3 : 27] And as we turn there, I invite you to join me. You can join me by opening it up on a different browser on your computer and just doing a search for Jonah 3. You can open up your Bible. Maybe you can see it on your phone.

But regardless of how you're doing it, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is more precious than gold, even the finest gold. And it's sweeter than honey, even honey that comes straight from the honeycomb.

And so it's for that reason that we read now, starting at Jonah chapter 3, verse 1. Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.

So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days' journey in breadth. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's journey.

And he called out, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. Verse 5. And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them.

[4 : 40] Verse 6. Verse 6.

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word.

Amen. Our Father in heaven, we thank you again that you come and meet us whenever we open your word, that you promise that it always has the effect that you intend it to have.

And so we ask that you'd send your spirit to do that now, that you'd use your word to encourage us, that you'd use your word to do that now, that you'd use your word to do that. That you'd see our need for your mercy, and we'd be convicted by that, and we'd see you providing that mercy for us in Jesus, and we'd be strengthened.

Amen. We ask these things with confidence, knowing that we don't have to earn them, because we ask them in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the movie Groundhog Day, which tells the story of a TV weatherman who finds himself trapped in this situation, where he has to repeat the same day over and over.

[6 : 30] And we see the scene many times of his alarm clock going off at the same time, and it's the same day that he has to relive. There's an element of that going on here in Jonah chapter 3.

We are seeing a Groundhog Day-type situation with Jonah, because there's a repetition here of what happened in chapter 1. In fact, we see some of the exact same language here.

In chapter 1, we saw the word of the Lord came to Jonah. Chapter 3, the word of the Lord comes to Jonah. Chapter 1, Jonah had to go to Nineveh. Chapter 3, Jonah has to go to Nineveh.

After everything that we've gone through in chapters 1 and 2, we're all the way back at the very beginning of the story. This is déjà vu. It's a repetition here for Jonah, because, of course, as we saw in chapter 1, he disobeyed God.

He didn't do what God had commanded him to do, and so now he has a second chance. This, however, is not just a second chance, a second repetition in terms of the command that Jonah receives, but it's also a repetition from chapter 2, because we again see a contrast between Jonah and the pagans.

[7 : 42] The pagans here are willing to repent immediately. We see in verse 3, Jonah goes to Nineveh, and Nineveh is a city that's a three-day journey, which is a way of saying it's a large city, and it would take three days to visit everywhere that Jonah needs to visit.

And in verses 4 and 5, they don't wait until those three days have happened. And they actually repent immediately. Compare this to Jonah, who, of course, takes so long to repent that God has to throw him into the depths of the sea.

He's in the belly of this fish for three days before he gives this prayer from chapter 2. And so there's a stark contrast between the people of Nineveh and the people of Jonah.

They are immediate in their repentance. Jonah is reluctant. They are tenderhearted in their repentance, while Jonah is hardhearted. They respond immediately.

Jonah flat-out disobeys, right? He doesn't do what God has commanded him to do. Here, they don't even procrastinate. They've been given 40 days, which is a way of saying they have a very long time to respond to this word from God.

[8 : 56] They have 40 days to evaluate their options, and instead of doing that, they just repent. They're tenderhearted, because while Jonah has to taste judgment, Nineveh only has to hear about judgment.

They are proving to be better than God's prophet at repentance. We also see that it's a grassroots movement rather than a top-down one. These people are the ones who repent first.

In verse 5, we see the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest of them to the least of them. So everyone is involved in this. It's not that certain social classes do it and others don't.

It's not that certain occupations participate and others decide not to. But instead, everyone wants to be a part of this. And what's amazing about it is that they actually beat out their own leader. It's not until verse 6 that the king of Nineveh decides to call for them to do what they've already decided to do.

Now, this goes against what we expect just of human societies and cultures in general. Leaders matter, right? And so they often set the tone. This would be as if over the last several months in the state of Colorado, we as the citizens had decided before Jared Polis made a single decision, every single one of us, no matter our job or our social class, that we were going to quarantine ourselves.

[10 : 13] Of course, that doesn't make sense, right? Because the way that the world works is that leaders are the ones who decide the action and set the tone. But here, to highlight how repentant Nineveh is, we see that the people act before their leaders have a chance to give them any direction.

And then there's this intense sincerity that accompanies this as well. We see in verses 5 through 8 that there's this putting on of sackcloth and this fasting.

Now, sackcloth would have been a sign of mourning or grieving, typically over someone who had died. Here, instead, it's a mourning and a grief over their sin. They're not taking this lightly.

They're fasting to show their deep, heart-based repentance. There is a real and true grief and repentance over sin. And there's a real and true turning away from sin.

That's what we see in verse 8, that everyone is to turn away from the violence that is in his hands. And so we see, just like we did in chapter 1, the contrast is complete.

[11 : 20] In chapter 1, the pagan sailors outshone Jonah when it came to expressing God's love and compassion for others in this world. They cared about the ship and they carried out the lives on it more than Jonah did.

Here we see, once again, the pagans are the ones teaching God's prophet. They are better repenters than he is. They're more tender-hearted repenters than he is.

They are the ones. The ones who have been hating God and acting against him are the ones who actually set the example here, rather than this prophet. And so it continues to be an inside-out story.

God uses this to drive home the humility that's required for everyone who follows after him. And for us, that would be those people who have faith in Jesus Christ. Just because we are Christians and we follow Jesus doesn't mean that we've figured everything out.

It doesn't mean that we're the best at something. It doesn't even mean that we understand God's grace as deeply as we should or need to. Instead, there's many times like this where there are others who outshine us.

[12 : 33] While in chapter 1, it was a lesson about mercy and compassion here, as I mentioned, it's a lesson about repentance. And we see near the end of this chapter a lot of language around that.

We see the phrase, turn away. So verse 8, this king says, let everyone turn from his evil way. And then there's a contrast there with God.

If we turn, verse 9, God will turn as well. Who knows, God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger so that we may not perish. That's three times, by the way.

And then in verse 10, we see it the fourth time. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

And so we have this picture of what repentance looks like. Repentance is something that shows true grief over sin, like these people in Nineveh have. Repentance is not just grieving it and not wanting to face the consequences, but it's having a deep heart-based sorrow, knowing that we have offended and hurt God.

[13 : 42] And more than that, it's a turning away. Repentance involves stopping going in one direction and turning around and going in another. In fact, that's the word, what the word in the New Testament that's used for repentance means.

It actually literally means a turning around, going in a different direction. And so they model that for us. They're turning away from their sin. That's, again, we saw in verse 8.

It's not just that they have this grief, but they're turning away from their evil ways. They're ceasing to do the types of things that God is bringing his judgment on them for. This lesson in repentance shows us what true repentance is over against the substitutes that we might have.

And, of course, there are several. First of all, there are twin errors of self-righteousness and complacency. Self-righteousness here would probably be what Jonah falls into.

We see God's word and we think, man, that's a great reminder. There are people who need to hear about God's judgment. Now, I'm glad that I heard about that in the past and I've turned away from my sin and now I just live a righteous life.

[14 : 53] Repentance is something that happens once and that's not really something that I need anymore. It's for those other people out there. That's the response of the self-righteous person. That's probably what's in Jonah's heart here.

We're going to see even more of that in the next chapter. There is not an understanding here of the deep sin in his life and his need for God's grace and his mercy. The other error is not necessarily one of self-righteousness, but the opposite of that.

We might call it licentiousness or complacency. I've seen a shirt from time to time some folks wear that say something like this. Jesus loves this hot mess.

Now, to be charitable, I think I understand what's meant by that, which is that God's grace is real, right? And he accepts people who are broken and messy, which is very true.

But I'm afraid of what is implicit in that, which is sometimes this idea that holiness doesn't really matter. God accepts me as I am. And so repentance and grief over sin is not something that I have to worry about.

[15 : 54] And so people will say things like this, well, there's grace for that. And there is grace for that, right? God's grace is real. God's call to holiness is also real.

Jesus loves this hot mess. Hot messes like you and me. And he also calls this hot mess to new patterns of living and behaving. The people in Nineveh don't say, well, God just loves our hot mess of the city.

So what we do in response is not that important. No, they're moved by the understanding of God's judgment, and they understand their need for God's grace. And so they turn away from their sin in a new way of living.

They don't choose self-righteousness like Jonah does, and they don't choose complacency. Instead, they choose this true and heart-based repentance. And so both self-righteousness and complacency believe the lie that our sin is not that bad, and we don't actually need to repent.

And so neither person really believes they need God's mercy. God's mercy is something that's either unnecessary, or it's something that's important for the self-righteous person, but it's for other people.

[17 : 11] Instead, however, Nineveh presents a third way. They present this true and real repentance. And so they remind the self-righteous, they challenge people like Jonah, people like you and me, that it's our need, not our righteousness, that qualifies us for God's mercy.

And it's hard to find a way to make this clearer than God's mercy to terrorists. One of the ways that this is a Groundhog Day from chapter 1 is that nothing has changed about Nineveh.

It is still what many people might call a terrorist state. Nineveh is still an enemy of Israel. Nineveh is still the nation, not Nineveh, Assyria is still an enemy of Israel.

Assyria is still the nation that's going to take the northern kingdom into exile in 722 B.C. And so if there was any way that God could show that it's our need that brings his mercy, it's Nineveh.

They are a perfect example of the kind of mercy that God has, as these pagans are teaching Israelites about repentance. The challenge then for those of us who are Christians, who have faith in Jesus Christ, and follow after him is this, even if we have that faith, we have still much to learn about repentance.

[18 : 32] Martin Luther was a famous historical figure during the Protestant Reformation, best known for nailing his 95 theses that started that Reformation, and the first thesis was this, when our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, repent, he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance.

repentance. That is the word, both for the self-righteous and the complacent. It's the word for disciples, for people who want to follow after Jesus.

In Luke chapter 5, Jesus says, those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And so if we're following after Jesus, we are saying that we are those sinners in need of repentance. God hasn't come for the self-righteous. He hasn't come for those who don't believe they need him.

He's come for those who understand and grasp and take hold of their desperate need of God's grace. For the complacent, we need to be reminded that God's judgment is real.

[19 : 41] In fact, that's what happens in this chapter. It's God's judgment that allows Nineveh to take hold of his mercy. There's this proclamation, right, from Jonah. He says, This is verse 4.

Now, it was understood in the Old Testament. In fact, I spelled out, I believe it's Jeremiah chapter 18, that when God gives pronouncements of judgment, there's an implicit invitation to repentance. In other words, it's not a definitive declaration of judgment, but there's an implied, unless you turn away from your sin.

That when God gives pronouncements of judgment, it's actually an act of mercy because it's an invitation to repent. And for those who repent, as we see in this passage, God's mercy is real.

Verse 10, When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it. And so, for those who are complacent, for those who believe that, hey, Jesus loves this hot mess, and so there's nothing really I need to worry about in terms of holiness in this life, there's a sober reminder here that those who follow after God, are people who repent.

Those who experience God's mercy are those who are like Nineveh, who turn away from their sin, who put it off. Verse 8, They're people who turn away from the violence, the sin that's in their hands, knowing that that's how God turns and relents.

[21 : 10] That's how God turns away from his judgment. Repentance and mercy, then, come in light of God's judgment. Mercy, by definition, is God not giving us what we deserve.

And so, while the self-righteous person needs to hear Luke chapter 5, God has come, not to call the righteous, but sinners. Those who are complacent need to hear Matthew chapter 16.

In other words, both people, both the self-righteous and the complacent, people like Jonah, people like you and me, need to hear God's call to repentance so that we can experience God's mercy.

Why is it that we repent? Well, we repent because God is a God of both mercy and justice. We see God's mercy here in this passage.

He shows it to anyone and everyone who repents and turns away from their sin. God holds back his judgment here, right?

[22 : 26] He doesn't bring that disaster, verse 10, that he had said he would do to them. But God's mercy and his grace are not cheap. And so, God does fully and finally bring that judgment.

He will bring it when Jesus returns, either to us or he will bring it on Jesus. And so, our choice is simple.

Do we want to face God's judgment or do we want to embrace Jesus' offer of forgiveness and let Jesus face his judgment for us?

God's mercy and his justice combine in Jesus. And we see that, of course, when Jesus is on the cross. Because God brings his judgment and his justice to bear, giving Jesus the punishment for our sins, the punishment that we deserve, allowing his mercy to come to us.

It's because of God's mercy through Jesus that he's able to offer mercy to Nineveh. And it's how he's able to offer mercy to you and me.

[23 : 27] Jesus received God's punishment so that those who embrace him can receive God's mercy. And so, how is it that we experience and take hold of God's mercy?

Well, we experience and take hold of God's mercy through repentance. We take hold and experience God's mercy as we follow the example of Nineveh, turning away from sin, being grieved as they are over the consequences of our sin.

Grieved not just over the consequences, but of the fact that it's violated our relationship with God. Taking hold of God's offer of mercy, turning away from sin and following after him in righteousness.

That's the example Nineveh sets for us, and it answers our question of who it is that receives God's mercy. Those who receive God's mercy are not necessarily those who call themselves Christians. And it's certainly not everyone in this world, but those who receive God's mercy, quite simply, is this, those who repent.

Those who repent of their sin and embrace the free offer of the gospel that Jesus offers to anyone and everyone who confesses their sins, turns away from them, and follows after Jesus.

[24 : 45] One of the ways that we talk about this is by talking about faith in Jesus. And as I've said before, faith has three components to it. This is from Charles Spurgeon. He tells us that first, faith is knowledge.

It's understanding the truth. And of course, these folks in Nineveh have that knowledge, right? They understand that God's judgment is coming and their only hope is to turn away from it. It's not just knowledge, however, it's belief.

People in Nineveh could have received this word and had knowledge of what Jonah was telling them and decided they weren't gonna believe it. Instead, they could have assessed their options, right?

They could have checked Jonah's credentials or his track record. They could have fact-checked. They could have investigated alternatives. But instead, they believe. They understand the word that Jonah's bringing to them and they believe it.

And finally, they model the third part of faith for us. It's not just knowledge and belief, but it's trust and action. We see them acting on that knowledge. It changes their lives.

[25 : 47] Their behavior reveals that their belief is true. It's that turning away from sin that shows us that their repentance is real. We're told in Matthew chapter 12, Jesus says when he's talking to the scribes and the Pharisees, that the men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it.

For they repented at the preaching of Jonah and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. In other words, as great as Nineveh's repentance was, we have an even more and greater reason to repent and turn away from our sin because we have seen even greater proof of the reality of God's mercy in Jesus.

While the people in Nineveh did not know that Jesus was gonna come and walk as a real man on this earth, healing the sick, restoring this world and dying for our sins, we do know that.

So as they were tenderhearted and quick in their response, we should be even more tenderhearted and even quicker in our response because we have even greater knowledge.

That's what Jesus is telling us in Matthew chapter 12. We have greater knowledge that taking hold and experiencing God's mercy is something that we access through repentance.

[27 : 11] Some of you may be familiar with the name of a man named David Berkowitz. He was a serial killer in New York City in 1976 and 1977.

And he was ultimately convicted of six murders and seven woundings. He was sentenced, I believe, to hundreds of years in prison. And there were many people who were upset by that who wanted to see him receive the death penalty instead.

And so here's someone similar to the people of Nineveh. They were known as a terrorist state. And this person is someone who's known for his terrorist actions.

And yet, just like God's offer of repentance was true for Nineveh, his offer of repentance was true for David as well. When he was in prison, his grandmother began to send him sermon tapes that he could listen to.

When he was about a decade into his time in prison, he had another inmate who began encouraging him to read the Psalms. And as he spent this time, God was slowly working in his heart.

[28 : 15] And David ultimately realized his need to repent and turn away from his sin. After reading the Psalms, he said he did this. I got down by my bunk like a little kid in the dark, he recalls.

I said, Jesus, God, I don't know who you are. I don't know if you have any interest in me. I don't know if you hate me or what, but I just want you to know how sorry I am for the things that I've done wrong, how I hurt people, how I hurt my family.

I just cried and cried. Looking back on that time, Berkowitz said this, no one can go back and fix things. You can ask for forgiveness and do as much as you can to try to have reconciliation.

Sometimes it happens, sometimes it doesn't. But the Lord wants us to go forward with thankful hearts. I feel I have a thankful heart because God has had mercy on me.

My situation could be a lot worse. Berkowitz now has a blog that he runs even while he's still in prison. And on that blog, he has a page of repentance where he gives his repentance for his crimes and apologizes to those who've been hurt by them.

[29 : 32] He said, I don't deserve anything, any goodness from the Lord, but I'm telling you, God has delivered me. There's a man named Steve Nash, who's a pastor and who is for the last 25 years or so, has visited Berkowitz in prison.

And he said this, God chooses people that we would not choose. The point is this, God's mercy is for anyone and everyone who repents.

God's mercy is for self-righteous people like Jonah who repent and take a hold of it. God's mercy is for terrorist states like Nineveh if they're willing to repent and take a hold of God's mercy.

And it's for people like David Berkowitz if they're willing to understand and claim God's mercy on their behalf and turn away from their sin. How do we experience God's mercy?

We experience and take hold of God's mercy through repentance. It's not for the perfect. It's not for the complacent. But it's for, as Jesus said, the sick who know that they need a doctor.

[30 : 49] God's mercy is for anyone and everyone who turns away from sin in repentance and towards faith in Jesus Christ. And so Jesus has come not to save the well, but the sick.

Which means that Jesus has come for people like you and me. And so we too, like the people of Nineveh, have hope that we can experience God's mercy.

Please pray with me. Our Father in heaven, we thank you and praise you for your mercy that you offer to us.

But we also realize that it's not something that's cheap. And your call to repentance is just as real as your mercy. And so we ask that you would work that in our hearts now that you'd convict us of our sin.

That you'd show us, like Nineveh, of our need for it, whether we've been a Christian for a few weeks or for our entire lives. And for those who are not Christians, who do not have faith in Jesus Christ, we ask that you would work by your spirit to show them, like Nineveh, the reality of your judgment and also the reality of your mercy.

[32 : 02] That you accept with open arms anyone who's willing to receive it and turn away from sin and towards you in repentance. We praise you that these are things that we can't earn.

Mercy, by definition, is something we don't deserve. And we thank you that it comes through Jesus. And so we ask these things in his mighty name. Amen. We're gonna end our time together with a benediction.

And as I've told you many times, a benediction is a good word from God. It's a word that's true in the midst of a world filled with words that are not true. It's tradition for the minister to hold up his hand to send out God's blessing on God's people and for God's people to hold out their hands to receive God's blessing.

And so I invite you to hold out your hands even as we're separated physically. Hear now God's good word over you from Hebrews chapter 13. Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. Thanks so much for joining us. And I look forward to seeing you all very soon. Thank you.