

Jonah 3:3-4:4

The book of Jonah has a lot of lessons for us as individuals and as a nation. It reminds us, of course, that you can't run away from God. From the highest heights to the deepest depths, God is there; he always knows where we are and what we are doing. It reminds us that if he asks us to do something we are not to disobey him. It reminds us of his great mercy. If you were Jonah's boss you would have fired him on the spot and if you were God you would have let him drown and found someone else to go preach in Nineveh. But God used a miracle to rescue him and give him a second chance to obey.

After the great fish spit him out on the beach Jonah went to Nineveh as God had commanded. He preached the law of God. *You have 40 days to get you house in order because God is going to destroy this city.* And implied in that warning was the thought, "unless you repent and turn to the Lord," for if God wanted to destroy them he could have done so without warning.

Nineveh was the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians were known for their ruthless violence. When they attacked their enemies they weren't interested in taking prisoners. No one who knew them and heard that God had sent Jonah to call them to repentance would have thought he would have any success. They would probably have guessed that after Jonah's first speech he would have been arrested and summarily executed. In fact, it seems that Jonah might have expected something like that and even preferred it. He didn't want Nineveh to repent. He wanted God to destroy them, they were wicked and enemies of Israel. But you heard what happened. The king led the way. He repented in sackcloth and ashes. He and his nobles issued a decree that called on everyone **to urgently call on the Lord and give up their evil ways and their violence.** And the Lord **had compassion on them and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.**

There seem to be many in our country, especially among people who are religious, who think like Jonah. They think that things have gotten so bad in our nation that nothing can change it. Our nation is on the path to destruction and there's nothing anyone can do about it. They see those in charge, who seem to be leading us down the path to destruction, as their enemies and wish that God would destroy them. But doesn't the book of Jonah remind us that we aren't the ones to decide when it's hopeless nor are we the ones to decide who should be destroyed?

God has called us to continue to use his word, law and gospel, as individuals and as a church. We are to continue to share that word even when it might seem hopeless to us, even if we think no one will listen or it won't do any good. We are to share it even with those we consider the enemy. We don't know what the result might be. The gospel is the power of God for salvation and the Holy Spirit works through it when and where he will. But we do know this. If the word is not being shared no one will come to repentance.

The book of Jonah reminds us to never give up sharing the word, no matter how hopeless it might seem- no one would have imagined that Nineveh would repent. The book of Jonah reminds us not to be angry if our enemies are brought to repentance, but to rejoice with the angels in heaven over even just one person who repents.

1 Peter 2:9-25

With all the negativity in the news it might be hard to imagine this, but we have it a lot better than Jesus and his disciples did. Financially we are all better off than they were. Our personal comforts and standard of living is much higher than theirs was. Despite what we see and hear on the news each night our personal safety is better than theirs was. And at the top of the list, we would have to say that we can go to bed at night and not even think about the possibility that we could be arrested and put on trial because of our faith in Jesus. We are truly blessed to live at this place and time, in a country that provides for the freedom of religion.

Having said that, we don't live in a perfect place and time. Although we don't have to fear being arrested because of our faith in Jesus we do see a lot of evil around us every day; we live in a culture that is increasingly pagan. How do we live in a world that is filled with evil? Do we withdraw and form a commune or adopt some kind of monastic life separate from the outside world? That's not what Peter suggests.

First he reminds us of who we are. We are God's chosen people, his holy priesthood. He has called us to be his people not to withdraw from society but **to declare his praises. We are to live among the pagans, but we are not to be like the pagans. We are to abstain from sinful desires and live such good lives that they may see our good deeds and glorify God.** As Jesus said, we are to be salt and light.

Peter gives us suggestions as to how to do this. He says that **we are to submit, for the Lord's sake, to every authority instituted among men.** Later we will read what Paul says about these authorities being established by God. This submission is one of the ways we let our light shine.

He says that we are to **live as free men**, but not as hypocrites, we are not to use our freedom in Christ, our forgiveness, as a **cover up for evil.**

He says that we let our light shine when we do our jobs to the best of our ability, even if those over us treat us harshly. After all, we are really working for God, not for men.

Finally, he reminds us of our motivation for doing these things even if we suffer for doing what's right. Our motivation is Jesus. **Even though he was mistreated and beaten when he had done nothing to deserve it he did not give in to sin. In our place, he entrusted himself perfectly to God. And then, as the perfect Lamb of God, he bore our sins in his body on the tree. By his wounds we are healed.** In response, Peter says, even though we are surrounded by evil, even if we are treated unjustly, **we die to sin and live for righteousness** each day.

May we daily declare the praises of God who gave us life and has showered us with the tremendous blessing of living at this time and place and who has called us to be his witnesses, his own dear children through faith in Jesus.

Matthew 22:15-22

Taxes. That has always been a touchy subject. No one likes paying taxes. That's why Jesus' enemies thought they had come up with a perfect way to discredit him. They would ask him about paying taxes to the hated Roman conquerors. If he said "pay your taxes," he wouldn't be very popular with the people. If he said, "don't pay your taxes," he would be in trouble with the Romans. But they forgot that they were dealing with the Son of God.

Jesus used their question to proclaim a truth that we need to remember still today. You know the words by heart. **Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.**

As Paul reminds us, there are two kingdoms that exist on earth and both have been established by God, they are church and the state. As Christians who live on the earth, we have dual citizenship. Because we live on the earth we are subjects of a state, a government that God has established. Because we are believers in Jesus we are part of the church. It's not an either or, it's a both and. When we do something for the state we can't say I'm not a Christian. When we do something for the church we can't say I'm no longer a citizen of the state.

Jesus says to us as Christians, **give to Caesar what is Caesar's.** What is Caesar's? As we heard from Peter, **submission, respect, and honor.** As we will hear from Paul when we read what he says by inspiration in Romans 13, **taxes and revenue** is to be paid if we owe it. We are to participate in society, make use of our right to vote, our opportunity to influence laws so that they reflect godly morals, and even serve as elected or appointed officials without checking our Christianity at the door. We have dual citizenship.

Jesus says that we are to give to God what is God's. What is God's? Everything. His first commandment demands that we put him first, above ourselves, above the government, above our family and friends, above work. He is to be first and we are to love **him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.** We know that we fall short of this every day. Any time we break any of the commandments we have broken the first commandment, we have loved someone or something more than God. When we realize this and confess our failure to put him first; when we confess that we should be condemned because of our lack of love for God; and then we see him pointing us to Jesus and saying, "I forgive you because he suffered your punishment for you;" then we are filled with love and thanks and the desire to serve him even more.

When we realize what God has done for us in Jesus, we don't ask, "what do I have to do for God today; why do I have to honor and respect the government; how much do I have to give of my money to the Lord and to taxes?" We ask "how can I do more for God; how can I do a better job of honoring those in authority; how can I manage the money, time and talents God has given me in a way that brings him honor and glory?" And if it ever comes to the point where the state oversteps its authority and tries to become God by telling us to do something that God has forbidden or by forbidding us to do something God has commanded, we will respectfully disobey and willingly suffer the consequences, just as Peter, James, John, Paul and Jesus did.

God has established two kingdoms, the church and the state. They have separate responsibilities. The church is to preach the gospel and care for people's souls. The state is to provide for safety and good order in society so that its citizens can work and worship in peace. But as Christians, we don't divide ourselves in two. As we live in submission to the Government God has established we do so as Christians. As we pay our taxes and vote and participate in the political process we do so as Christians, always remembering that everything belongs to God and that he must get all the glory. In this way we give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.