

Meet Jesus, the Greater Jonah

If you've got your bibles, go ahead and turn with me to **Matthew 12**. So today, we are going to wrap up our series on the book of Jonah. Now, you might be thinking, "didn't we read the end of the story last week?" And the answer is yes, kind of. We did read the end of the story in the book of Jonah, but believe it or not, that's not the last time Jonah gets mentioned in the bible. Jesus actually brings the story back up here in Matthew 12. So today, we're gonna look at a place what Jesus says about Jonah, and see what we can learn from that.

So in this passage, Jesus is interacting with a group of scribes and Pharisees. **Scribes and Pharisees**, if you're not familiar, were sort of the religious elite of the day in Jesus' time. They were widely revered, respected, looked up to as sort of the model of what it meant to have a relationship with the God of Israel. But today, the conversation Jesus has with these religious leaders is going to take a turn. So let's see what happens, Matthew 12, starting in v. 38:

[38] Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

So this **request seems simple enough**. A group of religious leaders want Jesus to give them a sign. Jesus gives signs to people all the time to point to the coming kingdom of God, to show that he is who he says he is, and so these religious leaders want to see one for themselves. "Show us, Jesus, that you are who you say you are, that you really are the son of the God we worship." Okay, let's take a look at how Jesus responds, v. 39:

[39] But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah."

Whoa. That took a little bit of a turn, didn't it? Jesus' response to them asking for a sign seems a little aggressive, even hostile. He calls them "evil" and "adulterous." Now, I don't know how often you go around calling people evil—I try to avoid that particular strategy for making friends—but most people tend not to like it. People, in general, don't enjoy thinking of themselves as evil. Same with "adulterous."

So **what is Jesus doing** here? Why does he respond with such aggression to what seems like a pretty run-of-the-mill, normal request? Because it leaves you wondering "wait is this how Jesus responds when people have questions about him? Is this how Jesus responds to *me* anytime I approach him with questions, or doubts?" Well, the short answer is *no*. **There is something specific going on with the Pharisees and scribes that causes Jesus to respond to them the way he does.**

Earlier in this very chapter in Matthew, there's another incident with Jesus and the Pharisees. In this one, Jesus heals a guy's hand on the Sabbath, and upon Jesus doing this, it says, "*the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.*" (that's v. 14). In response to Jesus healing this guy, and a lot of other things he's already done, the Pharisees start to plan Jesus' murder.

So when the Pharisees ask for a sign from Jesus here in our passage, they aren't just being inquisitive. They aren't seekers, truly trying to wrestle with their doubts and consider whether or

not Jesus is who he says he is. That's not what's going on with them at all—in reality, **they've already made up their minds to kill Jesus.** Jesus knows this, so his response to their request for a sign *reflects* that he knows this. Jesus knows that they don't actually want a sign that he is who he says he is—they've already *rejected* him. They've already *decided* he's not who he says he is. This whole request just is a smoke screen. Their demand for "proof" is just another example of the profound hypocrisy of the Pharisees and scribes. They claim to know God, to worship God, to follow God—all the while deciding to reject and planning to kill the one that God sent to them. In other words, **there's this deeply-rooted disconnect in the Pharisees between what they claim to believe, and what they actually believe. They say they believe one thing, but their actions reveal they believe something altogether different.**

And **this isn't the only time the Pharisees and scribes exhibit this problem.** We see this in Matthew 23, where Jesus tells people to do everything the Pharisees *teach*, but not to do what the Pharisees *do*, because what they teach and what they do are two very different things. There's a disconnect between the two. We see this in Matthew 15 when Jesus quotes Isaiah to them and says "these people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me." **Perhaps Jesus' most frequent criticisms of this particular group of people is that there is this stark disconnect in their lives between what they say they believe, and what their actions reveal that they believe. The disconnect between who they say they are, and who they actually are. That's their problem.**

But it's not just their problem—it's often **ours too.** The reality is that *most* people—followers of Jesus or not—actually experience a disconnect between who they say they are, and who they actually are. That's pretty common to the human experience. I see it in myself all the time—even in small things. **The other day, Ana mentioned to me that she was going to pick up around the house, get it cleared out a little bit because we were having people over that night. So then I get home that day, and the house isn't picked up, and I just start acting all grumpy and mean because now I have to do some of it. And she told me the reason it didn't get done is because several unexpected things happened, things she had to get done instead. And my response to her, I kid you not, was "yeah but when you say you're gonna do something, you should do it." Awful, right? But wait, it gets worse. Because here's what happened later that week: I told her I was gonna wash the dishes, because there was this massive pile of dishes in the sink about to spill out onto the floor. I told her I was gonna get them during Whit's nap. And then, I kid you not, when Whit took a nap, I was like "ahh, we can both do the dishes later—I'm kinda sleepy and want to take a nap too." I completely contradicted what I had just told her about how you should always do what you say you're gonna do. And my excuse wasn't even as good as hers! I just wanted to sleep.**

Here's one way we've shown it to you before: imagine that you start wearing a **tape recorder** around your neck at all times. Or, for our day and age, just imagine your voice memo app on your smartphone is always recording in the background. And every time you ever make a judgment statement about someone else, it records it. So every time you say "I just can't believe anyone would be that mean to another human being," it records it. Every time you say "that person is driving like a total idiot," it records it. Every time you say "I just don't think you should talk about people behind their back like that," it records it. Every time you make a statement about something people should or shouldn't do, it's logged in there permanently. **And then imagine, that at the end of your life, you are judged only on the basis of how many of your own recorded statements you lived up to, and how many you violated.** I don't know about you guys, but I'd be screwed. I make statements like that so often, and I then turn around and do the very thing I say no one should ever do. Often without a hint of irony at all. That's

because there is a disconnect between what I claim to believe—“here are the things I believe people should do or not do”—and what I actually believe—“here are what my actions reveal I believe I should or shouldn’t do.” And I think that’s true for pretty much all of us in the room.

We might call this the difference between our *confessional* beliefs and *functional* beliefs.

- **Confessional** beliefs are, just like it sounds, beliefs we *confess*. They are *what we say we believe*, whether about God, or ourselves, or about reality and life on planet earth.
- **Functional** beliefs, though, are what *our lives and actions reveal that we believe*. What the hard knocks of life bring to the surface that we actually ascribe to.

We all have confessional beliefs and functional beliefs, and often, there’s a disconnect between the two:

- We say and sing things like “Jesus is all I need.” And then we also say or believe, sometimes without even a hint of hesitation “I can’t be happy unless I’m dating someone. Or unless I’m married. Or unless I’m married to someone else.” *There’s a disconnect there.*
- We say things like “Jesus is Lord.” In prayer, we will even address him as “Lord.” And then we also, without even a moment’s hesitation, decide “I won’t submit this really obvious area of my life: my job, my relational status, my sexuality—whatever it is, to him.” *There’s a disconnect there.*
- We say things like “well I want to grow and become more like Jesus.” And yet at the same time will refuse to take any steps in that direction, like spending more time in the bible or receiving advice and correction from other people when they offer it. *There’s a disconnect there.*
- We say things like “I care about the things that are broken and off in our city.” And yet at the same time, refuse to give any of our time, effort, or money towards making them right. *There’s a disconnect there.*

In those ways and others, there is often a disconnect between or confessional beliefs and functional beliefs.

And as followers of Jesus we know that disconnect will always be there. **There will always be a gap between who we say we are, what we say we believe, and what we actually practice or reveal that we believe. But the goal is that as we follow Jesus, over time, that gap should be closing, slowly, little by little.** Over time, there should be less and less of a disconnect between those two things. And maybe for some of you, that’s precisely the problem. You hear that and think “yeah, I’m well aware of that gap in my life—and I feel like I’m getting nowhere in closing it. Some of us find ourselves really frustrated, even discouraged by that exact disconnect. And I hope that what we talk about today can be helpful and encouraging for you too.

But what happens far too often—and this is arguably what’s happening with the Pharisees in our passage—is not just a gap, but a *complacency* with that gap. So it’s not “yeah I know that’s inconsistent, so I’m working on it.” It’s more like “yeah, I know that’s inconsistent, but meh, that’s life. Nobody’s perfect. Oh well.” And that’s where we get into trouble. Because **what we’re saying there is that we have no issue with things in our life that are completely at odds with the way of Jesus.** And that’s a massive problem.

A problem that Jesus is particularly concerned about in this passage, where the Pharisees seem to have no issue at all with this disconnect in their own lives. **The Pharisees are either completely indifferent or oblivious to the fact that their functional beliefs are radically out of step with their confessed ones.** Now, before we move on in our passage, does that sound like anybody else we know? Can you

think of anybody else, who's maybe a little religious, a little obstinate, and who's a little oblivious or indifferent to the disconnect in his own life between what he says he believes and what he believes? Maybe somebody that we've been reading about for the past four weeks? Yeah, the Pharisees here look and sound and act an awful lot like our boy **Jonah**. **One of the things we've tried to point out to you in this entire story is that Jonah himself has this disconnect present in his life:**

- So, for instance, think back to chapter 1. Jonah's on this boat. He's on the boat because he's refused to do what God asks him to do, and run in the opposite direction. And the sailors ask him who he is—to which he responds **"I am a Hebrew"**, and I fear the Lord who made the sea and the dry land." And we all read that and went "what?! No you don't. That's not true at all. You haven't done a single thing that God has told you to do." What Jonah says is completely at odds with who he is.
- Then chapter 2. Jonah prays this elaborate, religious-sounding prayer from the belly of the fish and says **"with a voice of thanksgiving"**, I will sacrifice to God. I will pay what I vowed. I will obey." And then in ch. 3, he goes through the city of Nineveh, reluctantly, stubbornly barely obeying. Not exactly a model of thanksgiving or obedience. There's the disconnect again.
- And then last week, we saw Jonah, who claims to worship God as a **"gracious and compassionate god"**—but becomes furious with God precisely because God chose to be gracious and compassionate to the Ninevites. Again, what he claims to believe completely at odds with his actions.

Jonah has a very **similar problem** to the Pharisees. For him, **there is also this deep disconnect between what his confessional beliefs, and then his functional beliefs.** And so it comes as no surprise that Jesus brings up the story of Jonah with these Pharisees and scribes who exhibit so many of the very same symptoms. And so Jesus says "no sign will be given to you except the sign of Jonah." Now, let's find out a little more about what he means by that, in v. 40:

[40] For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

So around City Church, we try to say and show you often that **the entire bible, this whole book, is ultimately about Jesus.** All the stories, Old Testament and New are ultimately meant to point us to and see our need for Jesus. We did a series back last fall where we took a number of Old Testament stories and tried to show you how that works precisely.

But here, in v. 40, is **one person you never thought you'd see Jesus compare himself to: Jonah.** I mean none of the characters in the bible except for Jesus are perfect. But most of them at least have a redeemable quality or two about them. Jonah, as we've just seen in this series, seems to have *no redeemable qualities at all*. I mean this dude is just, chapter after chapter, a horrible human being. And here Jesus is, comparing himself to Jonah. Drawing parallels between his own life and Jonah's.

So he first says *"just like Jonah was three days and three nights in the fish, I will be three days and three nights in the grave."* Which, as we mentioned a couple weeks ago, is probably referring to how, **just like God provided rescue for Jonah in the form of a fish, God will provide ultimate rescue for his people in the form of Jesus' death and resurrection,** which we'll talk more about in just a few minutes.

But then Jesus goes on in v. 41 to say:

[41] *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.*

So **remember, the Ninevites were** this ancient, cruel, violent nation who heard the message of Jonah and responded to it. They all unexpectedly repented of their violence, their evil, and found God's grace as a result. And part of what made that such an incredible event is that Jonah really tried his hardest to sabotage the whole thing. **Jonah was a reluctant prophet who preached a horrible sermon, but the the Ninevites responded to it despite that.**

And so what **Jesus says, referring to that story** is "I don't have to condemn you, Pharisees—the *Ninevites* will condemn you. **Some of the most wicked, hard-hearted, obstinate people alive heard a five-word sermon, and still repented and turned from their sin.** The question is, will you actually repent like they did? **Will you acknowledge the obvious gap between your confessional beliefs and functional beliefs? Will you repent of your sin like the Ninevites repented of theirs?"**

And **the question for many of us** is very similar: **what will we do with the gap between what we say we believe, and what we actually believe?** Will we be like the Pharisees, who apparently are very content to let that gap stay exactly like it is? Or as followers of Jesus, will we acknowledge the gap and do something about it? That's the question.

But first, I think we have to ask and answer this very important question: why is that gap there in the first place? Why is it that most human beings alive, follower of Jesus or not, have a gap between who they say they are, and who they are? I mean, for all the talk in our culture about "being who you are" and "being whatever you want to be" and "being true to yourself"—shouldn't we feel totally comfortable letting people see exactly who we are? If I'm naturally a jerk, why not just let people see that I'm a jerk? If I'm naturally a womanizer, why not just let people see that I'm a womanizer? If I'm naturally greedy, why not just let it be obvious that I'm greedy? **Why, still, do we insist on pretending to be something other than who we are?**

Well, I would argue it has a lot to do with **something the bible calls "righteousness."** As the story goes, back in the beginning, way back in the garden with Adam & Eve, God made us to walk in this fully transparent, unobstructed relationship with him and with each other. **We were designed to live with nothing to hide from him, or from each other. In many ways, that's what it means to be righteous. It means that who we say we are is exactly the same as who we are. Our confessional beliefs completely in sync with our functional beliefs.** And that's how it was designed to work in the beginning.

But things didn't stay that way for long. **As soon as sin enters** the picture, that all changed. All of the sudden we find Adam and Eve hiding from each other, hiding from God, holding back parts of who they are. And **that's what it means to be unrighteous. It means we now know that parts of ourselves, are inadequate, unlovable, unacceptable as they are.** And so what we do is we hide. Like Adam and Eve in the garden, **we feel this compulsion to present ourselves as better than we are, and hide other parts of who we are, because we know that who we really are, somehow, won't be accepted.**

So track with me here. **That impulse, that compulsion to continually present yourself as better than you are—that comes from what the bible calls our *unrighteousness*.** It comes from this under-the-surface, subconscious knowledge that we aren't acceptable as-is. Whether we'd refer to it as *unrighteousness* or not, that's exactly what it is. And **it is what drives so much of what we do and say as human beings on a daily basis.** Even small things. When you show up for a meeting 10 minutes late and you feel like you need to immediately explain why you were late to everybody at the meeting, that's *unrighteousness* making you do that. When your spouse asks you why you didn't follow through on something, and you snap back at them about the last thing *they* didn't follow through on, that's *unrighteousness* making you do that. When your boss reprimands you for something you did wrong at work, and you talk to all your co-workers about how awful your boss is, that's *unrighteousness* making you do that. Do you see this? **All of these behaviors, even the smallest ones, are driven at their core by a feeling of *unrighteousness* in us.**

And **all of this is why we feel this need to present ourselves better than we actually are. This is why we have a gap between our confessional beliefs and our functional beliefs.** This is why we feel the need to say something is true of us that isn't actually true. Because of our *unrighteousness*. Because we know—consciously or subconsciously—that the real us wouldn't be accepted. By God, by others, or by both. So what should we do then? If the options are 1) be who we really are, and have everyone reject us, or 2) pretend to be someone we're not, and have everyone accept us, we're almost always go with option #2, right? Isn't that the only reasonable solution? Well, only if those are the only two options.

The bible actually introduces a **third option** into the mix. **1 Peter 3:18 says that Jesus suffered on the cross, “the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.”** The righteous for the unrighteous. So think about it like this: if this is us as we really are (*unrighteous*), and this is as we present ourselves to be (*righteous*), we need something to stand in that gap. We need someone to be the go-between between who we say we are, and who we are. **And according to 1 Peter 3, that something is Jesus. He stands in the gap. Because he meets us with the good news of his grace right where we are, in our *unrighteousness*. But at the same time, through the cross, gives us credit for the perfect *righteousness* that was so evident in Jesus' life.** So now, through that reality, we can own up to who we really are—*unrighteous*—without it being the final word about us. While it is true that we are *unrighteous*, we no longer have to operate out of it, as if it's the *only true thing* about us. It is also *just as true* that we are seen by God as completely *righteous*. This is what 2 Corinthians 5 means when it says that Jesus “became sin for us,” so that “we might become the *righteousness* of God.” It means that Jesus stands in that gap for us.

Here's **why** I would argue **that's so important** to get, and there's at least three reasons. One, **it means that we now have the complete freedom to admit to who we really are and what we functionally believe.** There's no reason *not* to. If we are now ultimately defined, identified with what Jesus accomplished for us in the cross, there's no reason we have to hold back parts of us that fall short of that. **We can now be brutally honest with God, with ourselves, and with each other about the parts of us that are inconsistent, without the fear of being defined by those things.**

Two, it means that **other people now get to be a tangible reminder of where our identity lies.** When we say to another follower of Jesus, “here's who I really am,” they shouldn't be surprised. They shouldn't be caught of guard by your *unrighteousness*, because they're well aware of their own *unrighteousness*. They too know what it feels like to have that disconnect, because it's a part of their story too. **When we**

confess the most unrighteous parts of who we are to another follower of Jesus, the proper response from them is a smile and a “me too. I’m unrighteous too. How can I help?”

And third, it means that **we don’t have to be discouraged, disheartened by the gap we see between who we say we are and who we actually are.** Discontent? Sure. Motivated to work on it? Absolutely. But not disheartened. Not helpless. Not despondent. Because the promise is that as we fix our eyes on Jesus, what he accomplished through his “three days in the heart of the earth” according to this passage—that he can and will stand in that gap for us, as well as give us the grace and the strength and the persistence to continue working on it by the power of the Spirit.

If that’s you, if you’re aware of the gap in your life and you feel discouraged by it, I love what Paul says in Galatians 6 on this: “let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not give up.” I love that it says “in due time.” Meaning not immediately, not overnight, maybe not anywhere near at the speed we would like—but in due season. So if you are in the room and you’re just so discouraged by the lack of consistency between what you believe and what you are, hear these words of Paul: *you will reap. The long, hard, arduous, repetitive work of confessing our failings and resetting our eyes continually on Jesus will pay off eventually.* That’s a promise God makes. So don’t lose heart. **And in the meantime, Jesus stands in the gap for you—he’s enough.**

These are all parts of what it means that **Jesus is the greater version** of Jonah. Jonah’s immediate response to God was rebellion—Jesus’ immediate response to God was obedience. When Jonah was pressed to the point of death, his attention turned inwards. When Jesus was pressed to the point of death, Jesus’ attention turned outwards, crying out “Father, forgive them.” Jonah modeled reluctant obedience, while Jesus modeled perfect obedience. And Jonah preached a message of condemnation, while Jesus preached a message of reconciliation. Jesus was and became everything that Jonah was not. And so **Jesus asks the Pharisees, and asks us: “you’ve got something far greater than Jonah in front of you—will you respond to me like the Ninevites responded to him?”**

So I don’t know **where all of this hits us** this morning. Maybe **for some of us, it’s an eye-opener.** An introduction to the idea that all of us—follower of Jesus are not—we’re all guilty of hypocrisy of some sort. And maybe this teaching was meant to open some of our eyes to that reality and start to consider it. **For others, maybe it’s a wake-up call,** a jolt to stir us out of the default assumption that there is no problem with having a disconnect between what we say and what we do. An opportunity to open our eyes a little wider and start to do something about it, confess it to God and to others, begin to walk in the freedom that the gospel brings. And **for others, maybe it’s simply an encouraging reminder** that even when you feel like the gap between your confessional beliefs and functional beliefs is as wide as the sky—Jesus is big enough to stand in that gap for you.

I pray the good news of the gospel gives us what we all need this morning. Let’s pray to that end.