

I. Set Up

A. Welcome. Introduction. Guests. Comment about Sat. PM service with other churches.

B. Today is week three of the series Unstuck – which has been a study of the ways we get held back – which is to say, it's a study of sin.

1. We started in Jeremiah, noting that before sin is bad behavior, it's a matter of our heart and our mind. It's bad roots.

2. Last week we looked at the scary idea – that we are often the last to know the truth about ourselves. Today Mike returns to that idea by making a handful of disruptive observations from the book of Jonah. Right now...

II. Story about Ben getting stuck

A. When he was about two, our second son, Ben, would frequently get himself in precarious situations. It was a bit unnerving because he'd motor away in a matter of seconds and then we'd hear one word – no panic in his voice, just a matter of fact report – we'd hear "Stuck! Stuck!" And we'd track him down to find him on top of the book shelf or hanging by one hand from the top shelf in our bed room closet – suspended between the ironing board and the back of a rocking chair. The unanswered question, because he was too small to tell you, was, "how did you get there?" It's amazing that he survived. But to his credit he had two things going for him:

1. He could tell when he was stuck

2. And he was willing to ask for help.

B. These two qualities put him ahead of most of us – who often don't realize when we are stuck and who are often unwilling to ask for help when we are.

III. We are exploring ways we can get stuck.

A. More specifically, we're looking at some of the metaphors God uses to warn us about the ways we can stall, end up in some back channel of life, no longer getting better, just getting older. Stuck.

B. We are supposed to get better - more loving and kind. We are supposed to grow in peace, patience and joy. It's uncommon – and it has been for a long time. In Ephesians 4, Paul complains that many people back then were stuck. The writer of Hebrews does as well. Being stuck appears to be our default position. But we want to find ways to move on.

1. God will meet us where we are. We do not need to clean up our act to come to him.

2. But we are expected to grow, change, get better. We need to see ourselves accurately and then make commitments to the right things.

C. We started this series by unpacking Jeremiah's argument that we get off base when we put our roots down in something other than God. Sin doesn't start with bad actions, it's a bad foundation. It's bad beliefs.

D. Last week we noted that Saul's example of lying to ourselves is one we tend to follow. We do not see ourselves very accurately. When our actions do not line up with our image of ourselves – we are likely to do just what he did: deny the facts, blame others and then justify our behavior.

E. Today we are going a bit deeper into the self-deceit theme. We are turning to Jonah, the prophet whose story is told in the book that bears his name. And what we see with Jonah is how common it is to feel that we are better or more important than others.

1. The three-dollar theological term for this is “self-righteousness.” It’s the smugly virtuous attitude we adopt when we think we matter more than other people, or that God likes us more because, well, we are better or more important than other people. Because, we are smarter or taller or more American. We are us. I am me. And I matter more than you.

2. This is a derivative of last week. It’s a subset of self-deceit in that it also derives from the fact that we do not see ourselves accurately. But it’s so common that it needs its own category.

IV. You saw a sixty-second set up of Jonah.

A. He was a prophet of God who lived during the 8th century BC, back at a time when Israel was politically strong but spiritually shallow. A few years earlier – in 930 BC – the nation had split in two. A few years later – in 722 BC – the northern ten tribes – fell to the Assyrians. During his life they were still strong but sliding into trouble. They were sliding into crass materialism and injustice.

B. But Jonah, who was a prophet – someone tapped by God to deliver messages – was not asked to help redirect Israel. He wanted to.

C. He wanted to tell them to get with the program, to love God and serve others. But God sent Jonah to the Assyrians – Israel’s enemy (the nation that will eventually destroy them. The nation the Jews hate. Think North Korea or ISIS). Jonah was sent to tell the Assyrians to repent. He really, really did not want to do that. He wanted the Assyrians to get worse so God would wipe them out.

D. And what becomes clear as we read the book is that Jonah – which you can do in ten minutes. It’s a short book. But what becomes clear is that Jonah is stuck. In fact, though he is a prophet of God, though he is a religious leader for the Jews – he is more of a mess than the people he goes to help. Jonah is more of a slave to sin than they are.

V. The story is told over four chapters.

A. In chapter one, God tells Jonah to go to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, to warn the Assyrians that if they do not repent He will wipe them out. Instead of obeying, Jonah hops on a boat and sets off for Spain – which is the opposite direction.

1. God sends a storm that threatens to sink the ship; the other sailors determine Jonah’s to blame and ask him what he’s done. He admits he is trying to flee from the God who created the land and the sea, then he tells them that there only hope is to throw him overboard – which they do. The storm immediately stops and Jonah is swallowed by the fish – which is the only part of the story most people remember.

B. In chapter two, Jonah prays from the belly of the beast. This chapter reads like a Psalm. In it, Jonah asks God for help. And after three days – this is all very symbolic of Christ’s death and resurrection¹ – the fish vomits Jonah out on dry land. Which sounds gross, but the Old Testament has several gross puns about how God or the land gets sick of the people and rejects them – literally, throws them up.

C. In chapter three, God repeats his instructions to Jonah to go to Nineveh with the news that if they do not repent he will wipe them out. This time Jonah does as he is told. And the people repent – from the king on down they agree that they have been wicked and need God’s mercy and grace. Don’t miss this, unlike Jonah, the Assyrians immediately do the right thing. And as a result, God spares them. Which makes Jonah mad.

D. In chapter four, Jonah complains that this is exactly what he was worried about. He says, “I knew you’d be merciful, which is why I didn’t warn them in the first place.” Jonah, who comes off like a guest on the Jerry Springer show, asks God to kill him. He then sets up a lawn chair just outside the city, so he can watch what happens next. (He seems to hold out hope that God will destroy Nineveh after all). God has a plant grow up to provide him with shade – which makes him happy. And then God has the plant die, which makes him very sad. In fact, he’s depressed over the death of the plant. At which point God says, “So, you are going to cry over the plant but not the people?” And then the book ends with a question:

1. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

2. The book ends with a question – and we do not know how Jonah answers. It’s a little frustrating that way. But, I think that’s because, we are Jonah. And God is asking us, “What’s wrong with your heart?”

VI. In rereading Jonah a couple weeks ago, I was struck by several things.

A. The book is a missions’ manifesto. One of the big ideas behind Jonah is, we are supposed to spread the news. We need to get out and tell others about the love and grace of God. We need to love and serve. We need to be part of the solution.

B. Secondly, God loves the city. It’s amazing how often the term *city* comes up in this book.² God loves the city.

C. Third, it’s worth noting that Jonah was sent to the city because it’s dangerous. There are some who argue that Christians need to leave an area when it becomes dangerous. In Jonah, God says, “I am sending you there because it’s dangerous.”

D. There are several things to ponder in Jonah. If you haven’t read it lately, take ten minutes and do so.

E. And as you do, remember, the fish is not the important part. When we read the Bible, we need to ask, “What’s the point? What is God saying here? And then we need to keep the main thing the main thing.

VII. So, what's the main thing in Jonah?

A. It turns out, it’s not about the fish at all. The book of Jonah is a warning against self-righteousness – against thinking we are better or more important than others.

B. Self-righteousness is a spiritual cancer that can undo us. Thinking we are more important or better than other people is a big problem. It's also a common one, especially among religious people. Jesus will make this point over and over in the New Testament – he will single out religious people as being among the biggest jerks. Here we see it in the Old Testament.

C. And because you are here- because you are in a church, which suggests that you are religious - you need to realize the danger you are in. Spiritual pride is deadly to spiritual growth. It will keep you stuck.

VIII. Let me slow down here long enough to say, spiritual pride is complicated and confusing. Let me unpack it just a bit.

A. First, I am not saying you need to feel bad about who you are. Self-righteousness and high self-esteem are not the same thing. Indeed, you can have low self-esteem and still be guilty of being self-righteous.

1. Everyone today seems to want their kids to have high self-esteem. OK. I get that. But it's tricky. I would argue that what we want is for our kids to have the internal strength to hold to their convictions. I would also argue that rather than high or low self-esteem, what we are really after is self-forgetfulness.

2. C.S. Lewis makes this point at the end of his chapter on pride in *Mere Christianity*. There he says, when we meet a truly humble person, we never come away thinking they were humble. They are certainly not telling us they are a nobody, because a person who keeps saying they are a nobody is actually a self-obsessed person. The thing we come away with is a sense that they are interested in us. The essence of gospel-humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less. Gospel-humility is not needing to think about myself. Not needing to connect things with myself.'

B. Secondly, while we are reflecting on whether we are better than others, let me remind you that comparison is a very unhelpful exercise.

1. As a rule, we compare from a distance – which means that we often do not really know what is going on.

2. And we compare selectively on top of that.

a) We may be comparing our “behind the scenes reality” with their highlight reel – and feeling bad about ourselves. This happens when we compare our networth with Bill Gates, our golf swing with Jordan Speith or our appearance with Hollywood's latest best-looking 25 year old – all of which makes us feel bad.

(1) This week I read that we spend the first half of our life wishing we looked like someone else and the second half of our life wishing we looked like we did during the first half.

(2) We are not comparing our IQ with the best looking super model, which might lead us to feel good. (Maybe not).

b) Or we go the other way. We find someone who is doing less than we are in something – you only give away two percent of your money? I give away 2.5. I'm better than you.

3. We compare selectively, which means we can end up feeling better or worse about ourselves based on how we frame things.
- C. The third thing to realize is that religion can fuel this problem. Think of it this way: there are different categories of comparison
1. For starters, there is the Nonsense Zone: Here we look down on people for reasons we later admit are stupid.
 - a) We say such intelligent things as – they are a loser because they drink Pepsi instead of Coke; or he has an I phone 5 instead of the new Android. He drives a Ford not a Chevy. He likes the Cards not the Cubs.
 - b) When I was in high school – in East Moline – we disliked the people who went to high school in Moline. They were losers. I mean, “they live in Moline!”
 - c) In college, I realized that no one had ever heard of Moline, let alone East Moline, so I joined with those who put down people from ... wait for it... Chicago, because, they didn’t even do us the courtesy of hating us back. People in Moline at least knew who we were.
 - d) In college I moved past all of this nonsense about what home town you were from because I was now in a fraternity – Alpha Tau Omega - so I was busy looking down on the Delts, Sig Chis, Phi Psis and Betas. (Especially the Betas).
 - e) Then after grad school, when we moved to Washington, I started telling people I was from “outside Chicago,” because no one had any idea of any place in Illinois not connected to Chicago.
 - f) There are a number of areas where we like or dislike people for no good reason.
 2. Next up is the Complicated Zone comes next. Here we come across people who we may objectively be better than in some way.
 - a) Smarter, taller, faster – which matters if you are playing basketball.
 - b) Or we find people we may feel superior to someone because they do not work as hard as we do. So we feel justified in having nicer things.
 - c) Or we feel superior because they are arguing that being a Russian is better than being an American because democracy and capitalism are bad.
 - d) And some of these divisions seem to matter. And yet you are following Jesus who has pretty radical ideas about how you treat other people – including Aliens and enemies. As I said, this is complicated.
 3. And then there is a third category – what I’ll call the Religious Zone.
 - a) Now, I am big on noting that, in a very important way, Christianity is not a religion. When you define a religion as the things we do to curry favor with God, Christianity stands alone. Because the Gospel is not this I do but this he did. The New Testament is clear that we cannot earn God’s favor. God is merciful and gracious. He’s the hero not us.
 - b) However, there are ways in which it is right to think about Christianity as a religion.

(1) In the back of *The Abolition of Man*, C.S. Lewis has a series of quotes from all the different world religions in which he shows how much overlap there is in the realm of ethics

(2) And when you define religion as the people who follow a set of beliefs, then Christianity is a religion.

c) More importantly, Jesus goes out of his way to shut down those who allow their faith in God to make them ugly, mean and self-righteous. Especially self-righteous.

d) Think of all the time he spent dismantling the Pharisees – not so much for their faith – he doesn't really attack what they believed – he attacks their smug self-important superiority. Think about the stories he tells – such as the one about the Pharisee and the tax collector or the Good Samaritan – where he elevates the humble bad guys and goes after the self-righteous religious leaders.

e) I want to be clear – though people all have value, not all ideas do. I do not believe all worldviews or faiths or religions are equally valuable. I think the opposite of that. And that gets me in trouble in a culture where people evaluate religions based on the sincerity of the person's belief. But if your faith in Christ is making you ugly and self-absorbed, you are doing something wrong.

f) Jesus spent a lot of time attacking self-righteous people. Jesus didn't have much time for those who moved from being the prodigal son to being the older brother.

IX. In a famous George Whitfield sermon – The Method of Grace – he argues that there are two things that need to happen for a person to be a Christian.

1. We need to repent of our sin – which is something the Pharisees do

2. And we need to repent of our self-righteousness. Have you done this, or do you think you are better than whoever qualifies as an Assyrian in your life? A liberal or a conservative, an alien? A

B. At the end of chapter two, Jonah sees his mistake. He sees that God's grace is as much theirs as his. But by the beginning of chapter three he's lost that perspective.

C. To become a Christian you have to see your self-righteousness you need to keep seeing it.

X. Campus Pastors

A. Are you stuck? Let me ask it the other way: are you getting better? How long has it been since you've surprised yourself by being better than you expected.

1. You didn't get mad?

2. You didn't

B. One of two things generally happens before we get better?

1. We are broken by life.

2. We see ourselves more accurately, repent and make changes.

3. The scary thing about the book of Jonah is, it's not clear if Jonah ever gets it. You think he does. After the storm in chapter one, he prays in chapter two and does the right thing in chapter three.
 4. But in chapter four he is back to being a self-important and narrow-minded jerk – someone who cares more about a plant and his own comfort than he does about all of the people in a city.
- C. How are you doing? If you are stuck I'd encourage you to do something.
1. There are always next steps of service or a chance to sign up for a small group. As we noted last week, you can go online, or go to the app or otherwise sign up for a Spiritual Check-In – a confidential, one hour discussion about your life. The option is yours, but we'd encourage you to do something

¹ This fish episode is important in part because of the foreshadowing it does concerning Jesus.

² In ? : 10 & 11, he says: You are concerned about the vine but not the city. That's not right. Jonah didn't want to see God do something good for the Assyrians. God asks, "How can you fail to love this place. There is something wrong with your heart!"