

“RELUCTANT DISCIPLES”
Jonah 3:1-5, 10-4:3, Apostle’s Creed, Matthew 21:28-32
March 2 & 3, 2024

Rich McClean of Oakley, California writes this telling account. He says: “As a general contractor, I frequently visit Home Depot. Actually, it has become one of my mission fields. I like to help people load their merchandise. Recently I was there and was on my way to my van when I noticed a guy who realized he had left his lights on. He turned them off, expecting a dead battery. I jumped in my car and thought of helping him. Then I thought, *No*. It had been a bad day. I didn't sleep well the night before and was running behind schedule.

“I prayed, Lord, I don't need this right now. You know that I usually would help, but, God, not today! Let someone else do it. Yes, I know I have a set of jumper cables right behind my seat, but not today! I slipped the key in the ignition, gave it a turn and . . . UUH . . . mm, UUH . . . mm, click, click, click. I looked down to see my light switch was on. Guess whose battery was dead now.”¹

Oh, man I hate it when that happens! It’s like God telling us, “Ok, if you won’t help another out in their time of need, I’ll give you something to help you get your mind right; something that will help you to know the anguish the other is feeling in their desperation. Then maybe you’ll think twice about waving off the opportunity to help.” UUUUUGH! God has a way of getting to us, especially when we are reluctant disciples.

But often, there are many more excuses we can use to avoid God’s call for us to be His workers than there are opportunities to help others out. It’s like the guy who needed some hedge trimmers, so he went next door to his neighbor and asked if he could use *his* trimmers. The neighbor thought for a minute and then replied, “No. Not today”

“But why,” the man asked?

“Well, the stock market was way down today. That’s why.”

The man then asked, “What does the stock market drop have to do with me using your hedge

¹ (PreachingToday.com, “*More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2003] pg. 131)

trimmers?”

“Well,” the neighbor replied, “If I don’t want you to use my hedge trimmers today, I guess any ole excuse will do.”

When God invites us to be His disciple, to be a faithful follower of Jesus Christ, we often use just as lame excuses as the neighbor did. If we really don’t want to be a faithful follower of Jesus, we rationalize that “any ole excuse will do.”

But there are times when God won’t accept a “No” answer from us. Take for example our Old Testament lesson of Jonah 3. God had called Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh to warn them what He was going to do to them because of their wickedness. *“But Jonah ran away from the Lord and headed for Tarshish”* instead. *“He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the Lord”* (Jonah 1:3).

You see, the people of Nineveh were enemies of the people of Israel, and Jonah thought that God had every right in the world to punish them for the wickedness that they had done towards Israel. Even though he was the very one that God had called to go to turn the people around so they could become pleasing to God, Jonah almost delighted in the fact that God was going to punish them. So Jonah wanted to get as far away from Nineveh as he could so that God would have to use another person to do the work of calling the people to the Lord. He wanted nothing to do with it.

Oh, how often we fit in the same category as Jonah! God might open an avenue for His love and grace to be given to a group of people, and invite us to be the ones to take the Good News of the Gospel to them, and we make up excuses why we cannot do it, or won’t do it. Or we rationalize that God really doesn’t want “those people” here in this church or in His family, so we put up road blocks for their coming in, or we just rebelliously turn away from God’s invitation and say “NO!” Sometimes it will work that God will find another person or another church to do the work. But other times, just like He did with Jonah, God will make it so that we have no other recourse but to help them out.

Take Lois Secrist for example. “As a 15-year-old girl in 1927, she promised God she'd go

overseas as a missionary, perhaps to Africa or India, helping the needy. But Lois never made that trip of mercy. At 23 she married Galon Prater, a handsome farmhand who became a heavy drinker.

“Many years later, Galon did become a Christian and testified about the peace of Jesus to his drinking buddies. But by then he was almost 80 and nearing death. When he died January 9, 1988, Lois's childhood desire of becoming a missionary returned.

“At first she resisted. At age 76, she felt her opportunity to serve overseas as a missionary had slipped away.

“I said, ‘Lord, I'm too old to go now. I can't do this,’” Lois admits. But this great grandmother was determined to fulfill her unforgotten promise. Lois, pricked by the memory of ignoring God's calling as a teenager, would not refuse a second chance at becoming a missionary.

“So at age 87, Lois Prater has become the unlikely builder of an orphanage in the Philippines, a lifeline to 35 children whose lives have been rescued from neglect, begging in the streets, and parental abuse.

“The 35 orphans living in the two-story, 2,000 square foot white stucco home, called Lois ‘Lola,’ which means ‘grandmother’ in their native Tagalog language.

“Lois's ‘children,’ as she called them, ranged in age from eight months to 10 years. Each of their stories was heartbreaking.

“Lois built the orphanage without taking out a loan, relying instead on individual financial support from across the United States. Because of her age, she was not supported by any church denomination and depended solely on private donations.

“When asked if that made her nervous, she said confidently, ‘I serve a mighty God. He's in control. I feel I'm not talented enough to do any of this. But God enables me. My responsibility is to do what I can.’”²

And that's all that God asks us to do. He knows our limitations. And He knows the gifts He's

² (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 8)

given us to use for accomplishing His plan of the salvation of the world. He just invites us to USE our gifts, great or small as they might be, and to touch the lives of those around us for Him.

But many times people will begin to serve the Lord, but they will find that because they are not given the credit they think they are due, or because the work gets tough, or because their life changes in some way, they no longer want to serve Him. They get to a point where they just don't want to be a part of God's plan any more and they stop serving. They stop working to meet the needs of others and focus only upon themselves. They begin making excuses why they can't be servants of the Lord any more, and they walk away.

“Timothy Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, once wrote: ‘Pastors often hear from their parishioners, “I work my fingers to the bone in this church, and what thanks do I get?”’

But he asks, “Is that the way it is? Your service was for thanks? Are you in your right mind? Servanthood begins where gratitude and applause end.”³

Well, our service to the Lord should not be for our own gratification, or for our own recognition, or for our own praise. If we are in service to the Lord our God, we are just His servants, doing the work to praise and honor and glorify HIM, not us. But so often we miss the chance to do great work for the Lord because we make it all about us, and when we become disciplined, or we grow weary, or we don't get what we think WE deserve, we want to quit.

Well Jonah found out the hard way that when God calls you to work for Him, HE REALLY WANTS YOU TO DO HIS WORK where He wants you to go! So “then the Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time: ‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you’ (Jonah 3:1-2). This time “Jonah obeyed the Word of the Lord and went to Nineveh” (3:3a) and he went throughout the whole city proclaiming the devastation that was coming to the city in forty days. He didn't tell them what to do. He didn't express his great hatred for the people of Nineveh. He didn't try

³ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 258)

to convince them to change their ways. He just did what the Lord had called him to do...AND THE PEOPLE HEARD HIM! They believed his message and they repented of their wickedness, and God relented from sending the destruction that He had planned for them. Because the people heard Jonah's message and because they repented of their wickedness, they were saved. From the king to the lowest shepherd and their animals, everyone fasted and turned to God seeking forgiveness so that He would not destroy them.

But that is what bugged Jonah the most. He protested to the Lord, *"Isn't this what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish. I knew that You are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity. Now, Lord, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live"* (4:2-3).

Jonah was royally ticked off because God is a loving God and does not desire the loss of any one of His precious people. Jonah resented God saving the Ninevites. While Jonah desired their extinction, God desired their salvation. The life of one plant that gave Jonah shade from the hot sun became more important to him than the lives of 120,000 people.

What God had called Jonah to do wasn't hard to do, especially since it was the very message that Jonah wished would happen to the whole city. It did mean that he had to relocate for a short time. Jonah just didn't want to do what the Lord called him to do, but when he finally gave in to God's instructions, his obedience saved a whole city from destruction! But Jonah was still displeased and very angry because he wanted nothing else but to see his enemy completely wiped out.

Lest we point a finger and tell Jonah that he was wrong in disobeying God's call, we should be careful to listen to what God is calling US to do as a new congregation here in Sheboygan. God is calling us to reach out to the people all around us with the message of their impending doom unless they repent and turn back to the Lord our God. But what are we doing about it? We close our doors to any other group that wants to make a difference in the lives of those of the city of Sheboygan, and if we by chance do let a group use our space, we complain about it and grouch to each other.

But God does not take this very lightly, my brothers and sisters. God wants us to obey Him, even if it is something that is completely outside of our acceptance level. This church is not OUR church! It is God's church, and it is to be used for the sole purpose of making disciples of the people in the Name of Jesus Christ. We are merely the guardians of this place, not the ones who determine what is to happen here! We're much like Jonah, turning our hearts away from the Lord and saying "NO!" when He calls us to obey Him. And that's not a good thing, for if we won't follow God's commands, He WILL use another group of people and another church to do His work, and He'll let us wither away, eaten by the worms of anger, resentment, jealousy, and strife. Either we will follow God's commands and become His witnesses to the city of Sheboygan, or we will disappear, no longer the people called by His Name. We will no longer exist as a church, a place where God resides, a "house of prayer," but rather we will become a social club just passing the time with lots of fun and entertainment, yet losing our very souls and the very power that is given to us to serve the Lord.

Jesus gives us a parable to warn us of the two options that are before us. Listen to this story with a meaning and then consider where we are. This is Matthew 21:28-32. (READ Matthew 21:28-32)

Jesus has called us into His service, to "*go and work today in the vineyards*" (Matt. 21:28). He doesn't want excuses why we can't do His work, He simply wants obedience. He doesn't want reluctant disciples, but rather willing ones, ready to step out and do as we're being asked.

The danger is our complacency. We've found Salvation from the Lord, but we rest in the thought that we're saved, and forget that there are so many around us that have either never heard the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, or they have disregarded it to the point of irrelevance. We are being invited by God to go to work in our local "vineyards" to bring in a harvest of people for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, and while we say "Yes, that's a good idea," we're not doing it. We become stuck on ourselves, and lose the calling of God to go out to the people here in this city of 50,000 people to call them back to the Lord. We become like the second son in Jesus' parable, telling the "Father" "*yes, I will go, but he did not go*" (Matt. 2:30).

God wants us to be faithful disciples, obeying His call to tell the Good News of Jesus Christ to everyone we can. He's calling us to become fishers of people, to catch as many as we can while the fishing is possible. He's not calling us to clean them; that's His job. But He IS asking us to gather them together so that they can become clean, being exposed to the Salvation of Jesus Christ, and having the opportunity to claim His forgiveness for themselves. Very rarely will someone turn to the Lord on their own. They must be told about God's love and grace for all of us, and given a chance to experience that love.

God is calling each of us to be a part of the church that actively works in the vineyards of our communities to reach the people around us. And that doesn't mean we have to become popular evangelists, but simple followers of Jesus telling others of the ways that God has touched our lives and forgiven us of our sins. A simple testimony of what we were like before Jesus transformed our lives, how Jesus became our Savior, and the difference that He has made in us since we let Him become our Savior is all we need. Who can argue with how Jesus touched our lives? No one, for it is our account of what Jesus has done for us.

But by us telling others about how Jesus has touched our lives, we're giving them the opportunity to relate to our story and find what God could possibly change in them, too, if they were to receive Him as their Savior. But they need to hear what He's done in us to begin to believe that He could work in them, too. We can focus on our small part of following God's call to "*go into the vineyards*" and do our very best, even with our small part of touching a life or two.

Craig Barnes, pastor of National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. tells it like this. "I was asked to conduct the funeral for a man who had helped develop the famous Boeing 747 aircraft. After the service, I spoke with the widow and commented on how remarkable it was that her late husband had helped build that marvelous machine. She said, 'The truth is, he worked on one little switchbox smaller than a loaf of bread. That's all he worked on for 15 years. But when that 747 lifted off the ground for the first time, it was the happiest day of his life.'

“He worked on one small switchbox for more than a decade. Yet the huge plane couldn't have lifted off without this man's contribution. Often we see only our seemingly small efforts and feel we aren't very important. But when the great Kingdom of God ‘lifts off,’ we'll be thrilled to find out that all of our efforts were essential.”⁴

God's not telling us that we have to develop the Kingdom of Heaven all on our own. Yet He is calling us to be faithful disciples doing our own part to make available the Salvation of Jesus Christ to as many people as we can by focusing on our own particular small part of the whole plan. God wants us to be willing and ready to obey His call to go to whomever He wants us to go to, and share the message that He gives to us. No excuses, just faithful obedience.

For many of us, we've been telling God “NO” for a very long time. We've run from His call to be His witness in order to save others from an eternity of separation from God in hell. But God keeps calling out to us, “*Come follow Me, and I will make you fishers of people*” (Matthew 4:19). And He'll give us all we need to reach those around us for the sake of Jesus Christ. Let's pray.

Father, You have invited each one of us to accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. You have given us our salvation as we have claimed Jesus as our own. But You don't want us to stay there, safely isolated in our own faith cocoon. You would have us go out into the world and let many others know of the saving grace of Jesus Christ. You have called us to work for You in the vineyards of this world, reaching others so that they might find the love of Jesus for themselves.

But we are reluctant disciples, not willing to follow Your call and go tell others of the impending doom that is coming because of their wickedness. Forgive us, Lord, for running away from Your call. Give us the courage to accept Your assignments and reach out to the ones you call us to go to, so that we might turn even a few back to You. Help us to be faithful followers of Jesus so that we might share our own story of how Jesus saved us and made us new creatures through Him. Give us eyes to see, and ears to hear the peoples you are directing us to. We pray this in Jesus' Holy Name. AMEN.

⁴ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, pg. 257-258)