**Sermon Series: The Reluctant Prophet**
**Sermon Title: The Self-Centered Prophet**

**Text: Jonah 3:10- 4:11 -- When God saw what they (the Ninevites) 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. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 2 And he prayed to the Lord and said, "O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. 3 Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live." 4 And the Lord said, "Do you do well to be angry?" 5 Jonah went out of the city and sat to the east of the city and made a booth for himself there. He sat under it in the shade, till he should see what would become of the city. 6 Now the Lord God appointed a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shade over his head, to save him from his discomfort. So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. 7 But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant, so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God appointed a scorching east wind, and the sun beat down on the head of Jonah so that he was faint. And he asked that he might die and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." 9 But God said to Jonah, "Do you do well to be angry for the plant?" And he said, "Yes, I do well to be angry, angry enough to die." 10 And the Lord said, "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. 11 And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?"**

**Introduction**: **Jack Harris** was determined to finish his **five-foot-long, 5,000-piece jigsaw puzzle**. It had cluttered up his dining room table for almost eight years. Finally, when he thought the painstaking process was complete, he stood back to admire his work, only to find ONE PIECE was missing. Mr. Harris has searched his home for the missing piece, but his family fears one of their two dogs has swallowed it. They have even asked the puzzle's manufacturer if they could provide a spare, but Mr. Harris has taken so long to complete the jigsaw that **Falcon Games** has stopped making it. His daughter-in-law, **Eve Harris**, who gave him the jigsaw as a Christmas present, said she thought it would be a challenge for the retired businessman. Mr. Harris is given a new jigsaw every year, and usually finishes them by spring. **But this puzzle was to prove different**. He said he started the jigsaw, which shows the 19th-century oil painting ***The Return of the Prodigal Son*** by **James Tissot**, as usual. But this time it took him eight years to finish it, or so he thought. Eve said, "***We got him this one as a bit of a joke, really, because he always boasted he could get them done so quickly, he's a bit of a whiz with them. It was marvelous to see it finally completed. But when we saw there was a piece missing from the middle, we just couldn't believe it. He was just so disappointed. It's sad, really, because now it will never be completed***." Wow! If your name happens to be **Jack Harris**, that's a tough pill to swallow! I'M SURE MANY OF US HAVE FELT THE SAME WAY WHEN WE PUT OUR ALL INTO SOMETHING ONLY TO DISCOVER IT DIDN'T TURN OUT THE WAY WE HOPED.

In our fourth and final message in the brief preaching series, **The Reluctant Prophet**, this is what we see in Jonah, the PROPHET called by God to warn the Assyrians of His impending judgment. In the passage that we're looking at this morning, **Jonah is forced to endure a painful outcome of his preaching to the Ninevites**: They repented, and now God has relented in sending calamity to them! His response to their good fortune reveals a lot about Jonah's own heart ... it was filled with sinful, self-centered pursuits, an obvious sign that he was walking in the flesh (**See Galatians 5:20**). What can we learn from Jonah's

experience? Let me share with you **three observations about self-centered people who fail to love others the way God loves them**.

**Self-centered people are SELF-DECEIVED**. **Robert Lynch** says this of SELF-DECEIVED people: "**Self-deceivers are people who don't see their own values, motives and beliefs clearly**." Like Jonah, they say to themselves, "**No one deserves grace and mercy as much as me**." Now, few would ever admit this, but most of us, at one time or another, have been self-deceived. **It is human nature to underestimate the impact of our own sin, while overestimating the impact of others**. **Chapter four begins with Jonah expressing his great displeasure at the sudden turn of events at the end of chapter three**. According to one commentator, this verse could have been translated, "**To Jonah it was a disaster, a great disaster!**" The Ninevites turned from their evil ways, and God, instead of destroying them, had compassion on the people who lived there. **While I would not feel comfortable trying to argue that the sin of the Assyrians could be understated** (their wickedness was so great that God would not tolerate it any longer), **I will, however, point out that Jonah was ignorant of the wickedness of his own heart**. Remember that in the first chapter, Jonah was on his way to Tarshish because he was unwilling to take the Word of God to the people living in Nineveh. He was eager to see 120,000 people perish under the judgment of God. **Listen to the note of disappointment in his words**: "**O Lord, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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**." There was no room for grace and mercy in the heart of Jonah when it came to his enemies, though these attributes completely encompassed the heart of God. As Jonah saw it, the Assyrians deserved what they were getting. They were evil. But this begs the question, "**Was Jonah any better**?" When God called him to preach to the Assyrians, he ran from his responsibility. He simply didn't care that an entire city full of people would die. **Contrast this with Abraham, who bargained with God for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah -- Genesis 18:23-25 -- "Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty (forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten) righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?** God had been gracious and merciful to Jonah. He did not perish when the sailors threw him overboard, but he survived in the belly of a great fish. **He was given a second chance, but did not want the same for the people living in Nineveh. They were not worthy of mercy and grace**.

***Have you ever made the same assumption as Jonah***: ***That you deserve God's favor, while others do not?*** Christians must be careful to guard against a feeling of spiritual superiority as God's children. **What makes grace so wonderful is that, though it is unmerited it is available to all**. We would do well to remember that faith may be the means of salvation, but God's grace is the motive for it. (**Romans 3:23-24 -- … for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus**). No one deserves it. Still, it is in the nature of God to act graciously toward those He loves. **Warning**: ***It is another spirit that derives great pleasure from the suffering of others*** (**Luke 9:51-56 -- When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, "Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" But he turned and rebuked them and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of**). The Sons of Thunder failed to understand that seeking the destruction of others aligns us with the work of the devil, not God. (**Review: Self-centered people are SELF-DECEIVED—NO ONE DESERVES GRACE AND MERCY MORE THAN ME.**)

**Self-centered people are SELF-RIGHTEOUS**. They say to themselves, "**No one has the right to be angry more than me**." **Jonah was angry** (**But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry) because, in his opinion, God did not do what He obviously should have done**. The word for "**angry**" means "**to burn as with flame**." In other words, the prophet was hot under the collar, and the focus of His anger was none other than Yahweh Himself. **Given the choice, Jonah would have preferred to die rather than to witness the deliverance of the Ninevites** (**Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live)**. **But was he justified in his anger? The answer is "no."** When God asked the question, "**Have you any right to be angry**?", He was not expecting the prophet to carefully present his case. Rather, He was making the point that Jonah's anger was completely unjustified, though I'm sure it did not feel that way to him. **But that's the funny thing about anger. The person overcome by it rarely sees his anger as inappropriate.**

The rationalization for unjustified anger goes something like this: "***I would not be angry if you hadn't provoked me. So, any blame for my current disposition does not fall on me but on you, because you're the source of it***." **You can bet that Jonah, though He did not answer God when asked if his anger was righteous, felt fully justified in his hatred for the people of Nineveh**. THEY WERE THE WORST OF THE WORST! **The irony, of course, was that his sense of self-righteousness stood in stark contrast to God's compassion for those undeserving**. To those of us who sometimes feel the same way, the words of James are a very strong caution: "**Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God** (**James 1:19-20**). It is safe to say that most of our anger is displeasing to God because it is sinful and unjustified. **We must let go of the notion that we have the "right" to be angry and leave vengeance to our Lord, the righteous Judge**.

A**h, how the heart is bent towards self-righteousness**! Even criminals look down on other criminals. That's what happened in a strange story from **Spain.** According to the ***First Thoughts* blog,** a 64-year-old man in the city of **Jaén** reported a home burglary. The victim, who happened to coach a youth soccer team, listed several electronic appliances as stolen. Days later, police received an anonymous call from a payphone. It was the burglar, informing them that he had left three videotapes in a brown envelope under a parked car. Apparently, the stolen tapes were evidence that the soccer coach was also a criminal. The thief included a note stating that he wanted the police to do their job and "**put that (no good) in prison for life**." Nine days after the burglary, the police arrested the soccer coach. *(Betsy Howard, "One Crook Telling the Cops Where to Find the Other Crook," First Things--12-21-13)* IT SEEMS THAT SOMETHING LIKE THIS WAS GOING ON WHEN IT CAME TO JONAH. **The prophet was so quick to point out that God should pour His wrath out on the Ninevites, but had no clue that he deserved the same from God for his sin**. (**Review: Self-centered people are SELF-DECEIVED—NO ONE DESERVES GRACE AND MERCY MORE THAN ME and SELF-RIGHTEOUS—NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE ANGRY MORE THAN ME**.)

**Self-centered people are SELF-ABSORBED**. They say, "**No suffering is more significant than that which is happening to me**." God wanted to teach Jonah a lesson, and it required that the prophet suffer a bit for the message to really take hold. So, as Jonah sat down at a place east of Nineveh and waited to see what would happen, God provided a fast-growing vine to shade him from the hot sun. We're told that Jonah was very happy about it. Finally, something was going his way! But on the morning of the very next day, God provided a worm that chewed the vine and destroyed it. As the sun rose overhead a scorching east wind blazed down on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. For a second time he wanted to die. God said, "**Do you do well to be angry for the plant**?" "**Yes, I do well to be angry**." The cause of his anger this time wasn't the fact that God had relented from bringing calamity to the Assyrians. **It was due to the fact that**

**something that had brought him comfort had been taken away**. As a result, the prophet suffered from the intense heat.

Now, of course, the Lord was using this circumstance to instruct Jonah. "**You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle."** God was reminding Jonah that his suffering due to the destruction of a vine was inconsequential in comparison to the suffering of the people of Nineveh had He destroyed the city. **Shouldn't their potential devastation have broken the heart of the prophet much more so than the death of vine that was here one day and gone tomorrow?**

Is there anyone here who is truly surprised by how consumed we can be with our own suffering? To place the needs of others before our own we must march in tune with the heart of God...a heart that is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love. **Warning: *I am convinced that all we have to do to live self-centered lives is absolutely nothing***! We are by nature self-centered. That's why we must be admonished to do nothing from selfishness (**Philippians 2:3 -- Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves**) and to remember that love doesn't seek its own.

**Review: Self-centered people are SELF-DECEIVED—NO ONE DESERVES GRACE AND MERCY MORE THAN ME; SELF-RIGHTEOUS—NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT TO BE ANGRY MORE THAN ME**; and **SELF-ABSORBED – NO SUFFERING IS MORE SIGNIFICANT THAN THAT WHICH IS HAPPENING TO ME.**

**Conclusion: We must learn to DENY the urge to look at life through a self-centered lens and try to see things from the divine perspective. This is the only way we can accurately display God's heart to the world and keep from being SELF-DECEIVED, and from becoming SELF-RIGHTEOUS and SELF-ABSORBED**. That's what Jonah should have done and precisely what **Cliff and Billie Barrows** did when facing a disappointment of their own. Though they were forced to spend the first night of their marriage sleeping in a small room above a grocery store, they made the best of it. The next day the owner of the store overheard Cliff playing Christian songs on his trombone. She arranged for them to spend the rest of their honeymoon at a friend's house. Several days later the host invited them to attend a youth rally where a young evangelist was speaking. The song leader that night was sick, and Cliff was asked to take charge of the music for the service. The young evangelist, of course, was **Billy Graham**. The two have been partners ever since. When things don't go the way you think they should go, don't get frustrated and angry. Rest in the fact that God has plans of His own.