

Tipping the Scales – Jonah 3:1-5, 10

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When it comes to marketing a product these days, the competition is pretty intense. Marketers compete with each other to nab the loyalty of purchasers of every product imaginable.

What's the trick? What's the secret to being successful?

Persuasion of course plays a huge role in marketing. Failure to persuade a potential client or customer has damning effects on even the most popular brands. But by taking advantage of certain persuasion cues, marketers can increase their chances of truly persuading us, the consumers.

Simply put, persuasion cues are mental shortcuts we use when making decisions. We're confronted with hundreds of decisions each day, and these cues often save us time and effort in making many of those decisions. For instance, we may be more likely to try one brand of sports drink over another not because we've spent time investigating both drinks, but because an athlete we like endorsed it.

Robert Cialdini, best known for his book "Persuasion and Marketing," says there are six persuasion cues used to captivate a demographic:

1. **Authority.** The voice or face of a product can help drive sales. This includes doctors, celebrities, scholars and experts. This is why celebrity endorsements are a big part of advertisements.
2. **A company's Commitment and Consistency.** If a business commits to something, it is important that the business does it. We consumers want to interact with those we trust. Following through in whatever a company commits to helps the company establish a respectable and dependable name.
3. **Scarcity.** That means, hype based around time limits and expirations. Limited time offers are surprisingly appealing. Similarly, limited quantities help to drive sales. "While supplies last," is still echoed throughout advertising for good reason.

4. **Social Proof**, or showing evidence that a product or service is beneficial. Statistics that are presented visually and that can be read quickly and easily will reinforce a sales pitch. Consumers find comfort in seeing results.
5. **Reciprocity**. Offering a target audience something for their time, like discounts, free trials and sample products all work well. These also create easy exposure for a brand.
6. **Likability**. People are more persuaded by the people (or things) they like. Being friendly or funny helps in marketing. Every time I see one of those Danny DeVito commercials for Jersey Mike's I wanna go out and get one of those subs. Danny DeVito is a likeable guy in those commercials.

If you like someone or something, the chances you're gonna be persuaded to support it or them go way up.

As I was reading this text from Jonah this week, there was one phrase that stood out like a flashing neon sign. In verse 10, the writer says, "God changed his mind." God was persuaded.

How does that sit with you? Does God changing his mind give you comfort? Or does it unsettle you?

If God can change God's mind, does that weaken God's standing with you? If God's mind can be changed, does it reflect a lack of certainty or wisdom on God's part? Is there a sense that God is wishy-washy, weak, or lacking in certain non-negotiables?

Or, does the fact that God can change his mind endear you to God all the more? You sense that God takes matters on a case-by-case basis and makes decisions based on circumstances of the moment. God takes into account all the variables, ponders them, and then makes the decision that feels right.

We might have a foot in each camp of this argument, frankly. At a certain level, we want God to be unpersuadable, unmoved, and unaffected by circumstance. But on the other hand, we want our God to not be a God of universal judgments. We want God to act in every moment with a real feel for every unique moment in history.

In the book of Jonah, God called Jonah to take a message to the people of Nineveh—one of coming doom and destruction. Initially, Jonah refused to answer that call. He fled—by boat to the city of Tarshish where he demanded the sailors throw him overboard. They do, and he ends up in the belly of this huge fish, of course, who spits him onto dry land. And upon God calling him to take that message again to the Ninevites, he does this time. The message was simple: “Forty days more and Nineveh shall be overthrown.”

This was a warning: In forty days the city would be destroyed due to the wickedness of the Ninevites. They were going against the ways of God, not knowing or subjecting themselves to a sense of right and wrong behavior. And God was fed up. Jonah was God’s prophet to these wicked residents: In forty days, it would be all over for them. Enough.

After the warning was issued, the Ninevites got the message. They repented of their evil ways. And upon seeing their repentance, God decided not to destroy the city. God changed his mind.

What persuaded God? Among those six marketing cues that we just identified that help to persuade, there was one that seemed to have tipped the scales in the Ninevites’ favor: the one about likeability. Except, in their case, it wasn’t their likeability that drove God to the other side. It was their lovability. It was the extreme love God had for them as much as God loved anybody else. That connection, and their willingness to change their ways, caused God to relent.

It is no secret that there are examples in Scripture of God carrying out violence against human beings—good-behaving and bad-behaving alike. And while these examples often fit the culture of the day and reflect how writers often portrayed their narratives in violent examples reflective of what was going on, scripture is also dotted with examples of God changing his mind like he did in Jonah—and as a reflection of the deep love he had for humanity.

In 1 Kings 21, God had mercy on King Ahab of Israel, a wicked leader and morally bankrupt human. However, the prophet Elijah called him out on it, and Ahab changed his ways. And God spared him.

Also in the Old Testament, Moses famously went to God and pleaded with God to spare the people of Israel for their disobedience and unfaithfulness after God had pledged to destroy them. And God relented and changed his mind.

Because of God's love for humanity, God's default is mercy, to the point where God will be persuaded to change God's mind.

God trends toward love—love even for the most wicked in our midst.

That love can never be thwarted. It's ingrained in God. Yet, in addition to God's love for these people, the Ninevites did something to tip the scales. They repented of what they had done wrong.

They believed God, the writer says; they proclaimed a fast and everyone put on sackcloth (a sign of repentance).

They decided, the Ninevites did, to go another direction—a direction toward obedience and prosperity rather than sinfulness and their own destruction.

So, not only does God's great love for us help to change God's mind. So do the indications we give God that we want to change.

As I've said many times before, and as you all know, there's a reason we lead our worship every Sunday with a confession of our sins. In doing so, we acknowledge what we've done wrong and commit ourselves to going in a different direction. All this in response to God's love for us and our belief that God forgives.

And the Ninevites remind us that God notices our repentance, our turning and going in a better direction.

Garrison Keillor once said, "I'm not sure I'm in favor of repentance. Sinners are the ones who get the work done. A strong sense of personal guilt is what makes people willing to serve on committees."

I get his point, trust me. But repentance is indeed a good thing, if it's genuine.

Keillor writes of a man named Larry, "a resident of the fictional town of Lake Wobegon. Larry was saved 12 times at the Lutheran Church, an all-time record for a church that never gave altar calls. There wasn't even an organ playing "Just As I Am Without One Plea" in the background.

Regardless of that, between 1953 and 1961, Larry Sorenson came forward

12 times, weeping buckets and crumpled up at the communion rail, to the shock of the minister, who had delivered a dry sermon on stewardship. But now he needed to put his arm around this person, pray with him and be certain he had a way to get home. "Even we fundamentalists got tired of him," Keillor writes. God didn't mean for you to feel guilty all your life. There comes a time when you should dry your tears and join the building committee and grapple with the problems of the church furnace and the church roof. But Larry just kept repenting and repenting."

Repentance is a good thing, if for the right reason. And God notices our intentions. And our intentions have an effect in addition to God's great love for us, perhaps even to change God's mind.