

Mercy to Nineveh, Lesson for Jonah

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[0:00] Amen. So I'll have to ask you to bear with me today.

My computer departed this life this weekend, and I had to handwrite my sermon notes. If any of you have ever seen my handwriting, you know that it's so bad that I myself have difficulty reading it.

So if I stumble a lot, you know why. Now on to Jonah. When we last left Jonah, his call to repentance had been more successful than a Billy Graham crusade, right?

He preached to the people of Nineveh that they were under judgment, and unbelievably the whole city repented. Find myself wishing that that would happen here, don't you?

But perhaps even more astounding is Jonah's reaction to Nineveh's repentance. His message is received and believed. It's a total success.

[1:34] But how does Jonah respond? He's mad about it. Jonah is scandalized by God's radical grace to the people of Nineveh. Unless we be tempted to judge him too harshly, I think we'll see more than a little of ourselves in Jonah as we are prone to do.

So let's see what we find out about what Jonah's up to in this passage, what God is doing, what all of this means for us, and how it points us to Christ. Let's begin by going through our text and then seeing what our answers are to these questions.

All right, in verse 1 we read, as soon as I can pull it up here. It displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry.

Now there's our curveball. Jonah keeps sending those our way, doesn't he? Never know what to expect from this guy. Jonah, finally obedient, is successful in his mission, and then what?

Jonah gets angry. He gets displeased that Nineveh repented and that God is going to show them mercy. So he prays to God, this time in sheer anger.

[2:50] Now he decides that he's going to give God a peace of his mind, which is never a good idea unless you want to end up looking foolish, as we'll see. Notice that Jonah is praying.

In verse 2. 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 were a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

So notice he's praying. Compare this prayer to his prayer in the belly of the fish. Then, he was pleased that God is merciful and that salvation belongs to the Lord.

He was happy about that. He's not so happy about it anymore, is he? And we also have it spelled out for us what has been motivating Jonah this whole time.

He ran in the first place because he knew that God would be merciful to Nineveh if they repented. He didn't want to see that happen. Verse 3.

[4:10] Jonah says, Jonah is so frustrated and so humiliated that he wants to die.

Now, to be honest, as a parent, it reminds me a little bit of Mia's reaction when she doesn't get the piece of candy that she wants. He is just straight up throwing a tantrum, leading God to ask in verse 4, Do you do well to be angry?

Now, what do you think? Does Jonah do well to be angry? Is his anger justified here? So what does Jonah do next? Verse 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.

So Jonah's camping out, probably hoping in his heart of hearts that something will change and Nineveh will be destroyed and he'll have a good seat for the whole show.

[5:22] Now, in what kind of feels like a well-orchestrated prank, God decides that he's going to teach Jonah a lesson. We read in verse 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. So what do you know? Jonah is happy again. Now, granted, it's a bummer to him that Nineveh isn't being incinerated with fire from heaven, but at

least Jonah has some shade.

He feels better about that. But, it is not going to be a happy ending for Jonah and his beloved plant. We read in verse 7, But when the dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered. So God gave the plant.

He took it away from Jonah. We might say that the Lord has given and the Lord has taken away.

Jonah learned that lesson. And suffice it to say, Jonah is not very thrilled with how things develop.

[6:47] We read in verse 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.

So the Lord really starts to stack up some miserable circumstances for Jonah at this point, right? He wipes out the plant, he sends the scorching east wind, and Jonah finds himself burned up in more ways than one.

He reacts in precisely the way that we've come to expect. He throws another tantrum and has another pity party. He was hot. His plant was gone.

Nineveh was still standing. And he decided yet again that it would be better for him to die than to live. Now God questions Jonah again in verse 9.

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. Now what do you think?

[8:00] Is Jonah's anger over the plant justified? Jonah has the audacity to tell God that his anger over the plant is justified.

He's right to be so angry over the plant that he could die of anger. Now his behavior is absolutely ridiculous at this point, but he still doesn't seem to get it, does he?

God is going to have to spell it out for him. We see that happening in verse 10. 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.

Now as we can see, Jonah is full of pity for the plant, the plant that was helping him and giving him shade. In Jonah's mind, God has done something horrible in letting the plant die.

The plant made Jonah so happy and now he's so bummed out that it's gone. What gives? Now God really turns the tables here in suggesting that Jonah doesn't care nearly so much about his fellow human beings made in God's image.

[9:17] We read in verse 11, 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.

Now the hardness of Jonah's heart is really put on display here. If Jonah cares so much about that plant, why shouldn't God care about the morally blind and helpless people of Nineveh?

Or at least about the poor innocent cows? Now, the book of Jonah ends with an unanswered question, doesn't it? We see that. But the answer to the question is pretty plain to see, isn't it?

Was God right to show mercy? Well, I think we would have to say yes on a couple of fronts. Of course God was right to show mercy, and this is what Jonah didn't get.

He is God, and he does what he pleases, and that is right. But we'd also have to say yes because the mercy of God is our hope. If we desire God's mercy for ourselves, it makes sense that we should desire it for others.

[10:32] The answer to God's question, even though it's not spelled out to us, is pretty clear. But we don't see Jonah's response, do we? I think that the book closes with this unanswered question to drive the point home for us as the readers.

So, chapter 4 was a little bit of a curveball, wasn't it? Did not happen as we might have expected it would.

So there's plenty to think about. Having looked at the text, let's think about what's going on here.

First, let's think about what Jonah is up to. Now, I think it would be way too easy for us just to dismiss Jonah as mean-spirited and as a crybaby.

But before we start feeling smugly superior, let's think about why Jonah is reacting in the way that he is. Remember earlier in the series when we talked about Nineveh being a threat to Israel?

That's definitely in play here. You can't fault Jonah's logic. Think about it. If Nineveh is destroyed, the threat will be gone. Jonah knows, though, that if they repent, God, because of his great compassion, will spare them.

[11:58] So he doesn't want to go because he wants them to be destroyed because he wants the threat to be gone. And what Jonah fears is, sure enough, exactly what happens.

The guy who was singing the praises of God's mercy just a couple of chapters ago is now really mad about God's mercy for others. What's worse, he thinks it's his place to judge God's actions. Now, we simply don't know if Jonah persists in that mistake. But we do see in this chapter another 180 from him. He went from repentance and obedience right back to rebellion, right back to a disobedient spirit.

And that rebellion in his heart is put on vivid display for us to see. So, we see what Jonah's up to and it's not so good.

Now, what is God up to in this chapter? Well, he is displaying his character and actually being remarkably patient with his rebellious prophet.

[13:11] He has demonstrated his mercy in his sparing of Nineveh. And he really displays his kindness to Jonah, too, reasoning with him and gently correcting him instead of punishing him harshly for his disobedient spirit.

God demonstrates by his giving and taking of the plan that it is his sovereign right to show mercy if he chooses, which Jonah rejected.

And we see him choosing to show mercy to those who repent. God sees that the people of Nineveh don't know one hand from the other, that they are morally confused and helpless, and demonstrates the amazing truth that God loves sinners.

And thank God that he does. Even the cattle aren't outside of the scope of God's care and providence, as it turns out. There's a pretty sharp contrast between Jonah's behavior and God's behavior, isn't there?

And what does all of this mean for us? Well, I think as much as we might not want to admit it, we can see some of our own attitudes and tendencies in Jonah.

[14:29] Jonah. First of all, his disobedience shows up on the scene yet again. Remember, Jonah had repented and had been praising God and finally done what God had commanded.

And then, disobedience happens again. I wish I could say that this never happens in the Christian life, but I would be lying to you if I said that.

It does. Sometimes we are going to fall into sin. Sometimes we are going to have a disobedient spirit. We won't be free of sin in this life.

The key is not to persist in it in the way that Jonah did. We repent, we confess it, and cry out to God for mercy, and we move on. The other thing that strikes me in a related way is that we can be outwardly obedient to God and our hearts still be far from Him.

Think about it. Jonah decided, okay, the word of the Lord came to me. I'm going to go to Nineveh now. I'll actually do that. But we find out that it would seem all along that his heart wasn't with the Lord, wasn't in the right place.

[15:56] It's so easy for us to go through the motions, to be outwardly obedient, and to not be walking with the Lord in our heart.

That's a mistake that we need to be careful to avoid. Now, I think Jonah's attitude about Nineveh also has a lot to say to us. Now, I am about to say something absolutely scandalous.

Are you ready for it? God shows grace and mercy to sinful people. That was scandalous to Jonah, except for when it was him.

Jonah knew that obviously, and he celebrated that fact when he was on the receiving end of grace, didn't he? But those people who Jonah viewed as enemies, he wasn't so wild about their being shown mercy.

Jonah liked God's mercy for himself, but he felt much differently about the matter where his enemies were concerned. Can your own heart relate to that?

[17:09] Maybe we're not so into the idea of mercy for some people. They've offended or harmed us. They aren't like us. They're not our kind of people.

They live their lives in a way that we find distasteful. Mercy for those people is scandalous. Surely, God's grace isn't for people like that. But God calls us to repent of that attitude, doesn't he?

Yes, it's messy. Sometimes we will get hurt. You know, I think about Jonah viewing Nineveh as a threat and not wanting them to repent because of that.

I think about our own place as Anglican Christians. As some of you may know, as Anglicans, we are part of the third largest church in the world.

Now, I think that there are a couple of reasons for that. The more secular, worldly reason is that for a while there, the sun never set on the British Empire. But, the other thing that occurs to me is that we had a lot of missionaries who were willing to go to people who were a threat to them, who might kill them because they wanted those people to repent and believe the gospel and be saved.

[18:38] Pretty much the exact opposite of Jonah's attitude. If they're a threat to me, I don't want them to repent. Now, on a related note, I think that Jonah's mixed-up priorities speak to us.

He really loved that little plant that sheltered him, didn't he? He mourned the loss of that plant, but he didn't care so much about his fellow human beings in Nineveh, did he?

Does anyone remember that story about a year or two ago that caused everyone to be outraged about that American who went hunting in Africa and shot a lion?

Everyone remember that? Now, as that was big news, I saw an opinion piece on that story written by an African man, and here's what he had to say about it.

Americans care about African animals more than they care about African people. That stings, doesn't it?

[19:47] Jonah shows us that that's a human problem, it's not just an American problem. We're really sad when we lose the stuff that matters to us. We're fixated on the stuff that gives us pleasure, right?

We like those things, but other people, we can be terribly indifferent about that, but can we really afford to be? I wonder, in our city alone, how many people don't know Jesus?

Can we not care about them and focus on ourselves, focus on our plants that give us shade? It's a stark decision in front of us, isn't it?

What matters more? Now, what do God's actions in this passage say to us? I think that's a pretty simple answer because God, unlike Jonah, is constant and consistent throughout our text.

He delights in showing mercy, he reveals his merciful heart to Jonah, reveals that we have a merciful God, my brothers and sisters.

[21:05] We can always run to him for mercy, knowing that he will always hear us and show compassion. What Jonah feared should be our delight.

God, the challenge for us is to live as people who have received mercy. Humble, compassionate, tender-hearted people, having an overwhelming desire and determination that others too will come to know and experience the salvation of the Lord.

God's attitude and Jonah's attitude in this passage.

And that difference points us to Jesus Christ our Lord. Look at God's concern for the people of Nineveh, who can't tell one hand from the other. Don't you see in that concern the one who came to seek and to save the lost, who came to call sinners to repentance, who gave his life as a ransom for many?

Don't you see him in that concern for the people of Nineveh? And look at what Jonah should have done as God's prophet and failed to do. He should have obeyed with a glad heart.

[22:23] He should have rejoiced with God over the repentance of Nineveh, even if Nineveh was a threat to his safety. But he didn't. He didn't show compassion for his fellow human beings made in God's image.

But his shortcomings illustrate the difference between Jonah and Jesus, the better prophet, the one who was greater than Jonah, the one who obeyed his father perfectly to save those who were disobedient, the one who was so determined to save us that he went to his death willingly as a sacrifice for us when we were his enemies.

Jesus, so unlike Jonah, who didn't want God's mercy to be shown to his enemies. Jesus, unlike Jonah, was so filled with compassion for the lost that he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, dying a shameful death on a cross.

nationals. Now, as we wrap up our Jonah series, we might ask, why does Jonah still speak to us today?

and there are a few reasons the human heart hasn't changed really, has it? I see an awful lot of my own stumblings in Jonah but the more glorious truth is that God hasn't changed either He is still extremely patient with us when we go astray but sends us correction He is still sovereign over everything He is still merciful and compassionate and calls His people to be the same and He still expects us to proclaim His word to those who don't know Him but if we're asking why Jonah still speaks to us we'd be wrong to forget the important truth that Jonah points us forward to the one

who is greater than Jonah the Lord Jesus and He is the same yesterday, today, and forever praise Him in the name of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit
[24:49] Amen