

The Challenge: Shall we not display God's mercy?

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[0 : 00] Let's once again ask God to help us as we listen to his word. Heavenly Father, as Hilda just said, this is not just the word of the Lord, but the word from our God, from you.

And so, Father, we just pray, Lord, that we would listen to you, that we would open our hearts and allow your Holy Spirit to work in us so that we might have your heart, we might follow in your footsteps so that we might do what is pleasing to you and praise you because of who you are. We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. What happens when God doesn't do what we like? If you've been following this mini-series on Jonah, you might remember that was the opening question of our very first sermon.

What happens when God doesn't do what we like? And we said basically there are two options. You can either try fleeing him or fearing him.

And Jonah tried the first option, didn't he? But what he ended up getting, as we've heard over the weeks, were storms, being thrown into the sea, and being swallowed by a big fish.

[1 : 22] And last week, we saw that Jonah got a restart, a second chance, as this time he seems to fear God, obey him, go to the Nineveh, and preach God's word.

And as Jonah preached, another miracle happened, as the whole city got on its knees. So it seems like we've got our happy ending. It's job done, mission accomplished, everything's done and dusted, we can all go home now.

Except, chapter 3 verse 10 isn't the end of the book of Jonah. Instead, we get Jonah chapter 4. And it seems to be really weird, doesn't it?

Suddenly, Jonah seems to regress. He is now sulking and bitterly complaining to God. He seems really unhappy about the job he's done. And God also seems to respond in rather irrelevant ways. Why all this talk about plants? Everything just doesn't seem to fit. No wonder the majority of children's Bibles tend to leave out this chapter whenever they tell the story of Jonah.

[2 : 40] It doesn't fit the formula. But the truth is, Jonah chapter 4 is actually the true climax of the book.

In this chapter, we find the heart of this book's message. In this chapter, God does what he always intended for this book to do.

And that is to expose our hearts in order to reform it. You see, chapter 4 shows us what comes out of our hearts whenever God doesn't do what we like.

We get angry. Have a look at verse 1 and that is Jonah's response, isn't it? And what a strange reaction.

Doesn't every evangelist rejoice when they see a crowd turning to God? But Jonah simply gets very angry. But why?

[3 : 49] To understand this, let's first of all briefly reflect on the nature of anger. Now think back to the last time you got angry. Why did you get upset?

Wasn't it because you believe something wrong has been done to you or to someone you cared about? So maybe you got upset because the person cut queue in front of you and didn't follow the rules.

Oh, that's surely unfair. Or you got upset because your child is being repeatedly hit by another child. Even though you patiently and firmly told the other kid not to do that five times already.

And you got even angrier because the other parent doesn't seem to be doing anything about it.

Well, that's how anger shows up. It appears whenever you perceive a wrong has been done which then triggers a sense of disapproval and leads you to express that displeasure or outrage in one way or another.

Now that can take many forms. It could be shouting. It could be cold-shouldering the other party. It could be looking to inflict revenge on them. And whenever you are angry, you are operating in a judicial mode.

[5 : 21] What I mean is this. You are making a judgment that something that matters to you has gone amiss. That someone is doing something deeply wrong and it moves you to both feel strongly and to do something.

And Jonah is angry precisely because he has judged a perceived wrong has happened. You can see that again in the first half of verse 1.

But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong. Now, what was very wrong? Is it the Ninevites' sin?

The Ninevites, remember, are a bloodthirsty lord. Nahum, another one of God's prophets, once called Nineveh a city of blood, full of lies, full of plunder, never without victims.

Today, if you go to visit the British Museum, you can actually find one room which depicts their violence, whether it is carvings of people having their tongues cut out or heads being displayed on spears.

[6 : 40] And you could certainly see why Jonah might be angry at them. But the great shock of Jonah 4 is that Jonah's anger is actually directed elsewhere.

Let's come back to verse 1. Our English translations hide this a little. But literally, verse 1 actually says, and it was evil to Jonah.

A great evil. That is how Jonah interprets God's actions. In Jonah 3, verse 10, the people turned from their evil ways and as a result, God did not bring disaster on them.

But to Jonah, this action of God in relenting was nothing less than a disaster in itself. A great evil.

And so Jonah is making a moral judgment on God.

The Ninevites were the evil ones. But in Jonah's eyes, God, by not bringing judgment upon them, is proving himself to be just as evil.

[8 : 02] In other words, the perceived wrong is not Nineveh's actual sins, but God's grace in sparing Nineveh. And that is what causes Jonah to burn with rage.

And he is not shy about telling God that, verse 2. Isn't that what I said, Lord, when I was still at home? This 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.

You see, Jonah, as we found out back in chapter 1, is a very good theologian. Remember how in chapter 1, he made clear to the sailors that God is the maker of the sea and the dry land?

And now, once again, his theology is on point. Not only does he know God is creator, he also knows God is gracious and compassionate.

[9 : 16] But to Jonah, that is the essential problem. God is just too merciful. And this time, he's gone too far.

That is the wrong. God's character is flawed. So Jonah complains. How can you be this merciful when you claim to be a God of justice?

I always suspected you would do this, God. Which is why I never wanted to go to Nineveh. It is wrong, wrong, wrong.

And I wonder if you've ever felt the way Jonah feels. Have you ever felt that God is just so unfair? Letting evil people off the hook?

Not punishing those whom you deem worthy of punishment? Well, that is where Jonah is. God's actions, in fact, disgust him so much that he declares, verse 3, it is better for me to die than to live.

[10 : 28] But here is the key question of this passage. It's the one God gently asks in verse 4. Is it right for you to be angry?

You see, yes, there is such a thing as righteous anger. If you have accurately perceived a wrong, if it's something that God says you should hate, like, say, child abuse, anger can actually be an appropriate Christian response.

But God asks, are you sure you have accurately perceived the wrong? Honestly speaking, do you have a right to be angry?

And Jonah knows the answer. He is too good a theologian not to know. You see, the words he says in 4 verse 2 are not actually his own.

Jonah is actually quoting Exodus 34 verse 6 to 7, some of the most famous words of the Old Testament. And they are famous for a reason. These words, you see, were first spoken by God

himself to Moses during a shocking incident.

[11:59] An incident that Jonah surely knows. At this point in the Exodus story, Israel has been set free from slavery in Egypt, provided for by God in the wilderness, and they are now at Mount Sinai.

where God has graciously made clear his desire to be in relationship with them and to give them the law so that they will know how to live the best way possible.

But what did Israel do next? Almost immediately, they built golden calves. They carve out idols to worship.

They break the covenant God has just made with them. They have done the equivalent of committing adultery on their wedding night. And God has absolutely every right to walk away from them.

But Moses pleaded with him. And here is the thing. Even though the nation didn't even repent at this point, God changed his mind.

[13:13] He acted with overwhelming grace and mercy towards them. He decided to stay with them and to stick with them and to be good towards them.

And it is in this context, God then says the amazing words of Exodus 34, verse 6 to 7 on the screen. And he passed in front of Moses proclaiming, The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin.

Yet he does not live the guilty, unpunished. God is declaring who he is. And Jonah knows all this. He is a good theologian, remember? He knows it is in God's nature to show mercy. And he knows exactly that is how God treated Israel.

[14:26] Even before they turn back to him. But now, he has to face the full implications of his theology.

If he praises God for such mercy when he was saved back in chapter 2, how can he complain when that very same mercy saved Nineveh in chapter 3?

Especially since they repented. He cannot have it both ways. He cannot say, oh, God can be merciful only when it benefits him or Israel and not be merciful when it benefits someone else.

If God can show mercy to Israel, as he frequently does, he is well within his rights to show anyone else that same mercy.

Because that is just who God is. And so Jonah knows it is not right for him to be angry. And yet, he holds on to his anger.

[15:38] Why? Because, you see, Jonah's heart at its core is still self-righteous.

To him, grace can only be shown to people like him. Grace is only for the deserving. Never mind that is the exact opposite of what grace actually means.

And God is now exposing his heart by his question. And he is exposing ours as well. For the question we must ask ourselves is this, is Jonah me?

I might say I believe the gospel. I might say I thoroughly accept the theology of the Bible. But deep down, do I secretly believe that some of us really deserve God's favour just a little more than others?

After all, am I not a respectable person who is generous to others? surely God must be just a little more gracious to me. Or do I secretly believe that some people deserve less of God's favour than others?

[17:00] Do I secretly think that, oh, that person, she's just a little too loud. Sometimes she says provocative and unnecessary things. Oh, she probably turns God off too.

Sure. we know in our heads that the gospel is all about God's grace. But when it comes down to it, do we want to face the full implications of the gospel?

Because to do so means knowing God wants to have a real and loving relationship even with people whom we disapprove of, people who drive us crazy, people who seem to be full of drama.

And yet so often we think we know better than God who deserves grace and who doesn't. So often we are like the older brother in the parable that Jesus tells about the two sons who cannot comprehend how the father can welcome back the prodigal sibling.

And that is because so often our hearts default to self-righteousness. In the middle of the 20th century, there was a Lutheran pastor called Henry Garrick.

[18:25] And one day he was asked to do the most thankless job possible. He was asked to be a chaplain to 15 of the highest ranking Nazi officers who at that time were on trial in Nuremberg for

war crimes.

Now Garrick knew personally what these Nazis had done. He had seen the concentration camp himself and he had read the official charges that they were charged with and it filled 22 volumes. It was hard to fathom the depth of the crimes they had committed. As he himself wrote later, I was frightened by the absolute depths of evil in these men.

But slowly over time as he ministered to them, he began to see them as fellow human beings who were lost souls. And though they were resistant to him at first, eventually they opened up to him to the point where when they learned that he was finishing up, they pleaded with his wife just to let him be chaplain to them for a few extra months.

And by the end, according to Garrick himself, he believed eight out of the fifteen genuinely repented and believed in Jesus Christ.

[19:57] But this was when the discontentment started. As soon as he expressed that, trouble began to stir at home. He began receiving hate mail after hate mail, including from professing Christians, filling up four fouling cabinets in all.

How dare he say these people could deserve God's mercy? How dare he do the devil's work? He was a Nazi lover who deserved to be executed with the rest of them.

People were very angry. They liked the idea of God's mercy, but only when it included people they approve of.

And so today God wants us to honestly ask ourselves whether we have the same attitude even if subconsciously. you might love to sing of the ten thousand reasons you can praise God because you have received his mercy.

And yet as soon as you realize that God can and will similarly display his mercy to others, others that have hurt you, others that have perhaps even harmed you, others that have displeased and offended and wounded you, your heart cannot help but throw a little bit of a tantrum.

[21:30] And you get even more upset when you realize that God expects you to show mercy the way he shows mercy. That means releasing a person who has offended you from any judgment that you have placed upon them or any resentment that you harbor towards them.

That means no longer harping on the situation. And you say impossible. Doesn't God know that they deserve your displeasure?

But if that is you, God is asking you today, is it right for you to be angry when you have been the beneficiary of his mercy when you should have felt the full force of his fury?

But perhaps you might object, God, don't you know that showing mercy to the other party means my own self-interest might be threatened? You see, Jonah knew full well that if Nineveh repented, that might not be the best for Israel's national interest, humanly speaking.

After all, as traditional enemies of Israel, might they not move against God's people in the future?

And we too can protest God showing mercy to others if we think that means we lose out as a result.

[23:04] You know, Lord, those people, they cheated me and weren't showing mercy to them just caused me to suffer loss? Don't you know what that people group is like always asserting superiority over us?

So how can you tolerate that since it might impact your church negatively? But when we think like that, we show that we have forgotten God is the one who controls the seas, the dry land, the fish, even the wind.

And yes, every situation, including yours, we expose our self-righteous hearts, which turns out to be nothing like God's patient heart.

And actually, that is what verses 5 to 11 will show us. God will show us his patient heart in contrast to our self-righteous hearts.

God to see if God would really follow through what he says.

[24:18] He now exits the city heading east and it seems like he's waiting, waiting for the 40 days to be up to see if God would really follow through with what he says.

Perhaps he's even hoping that during this time God might even change his mind and bring judgment after all. And as he waits, verse 6, he builds himself a shelter.

Now, this is actually a booth. And do you know when the Israelites usually build booths? They do it every year during the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles depending on your English translation.

They do it after the Day of Atonement to celebrate God's great mercy to Israel in providing for and protecting them.

How ironic then for Jonah to be building a booth that is meant to recall and represent God's grace when he himself has yet to understand how grace works.

[25 : 29] He has yet to learn his lesson. God says it's time for Jonah to go to the school of grace. God is a master teacher.

He knows he's got to be more creative than just giving a lecture. So verse 6, God now provides a leafy plant the same way he provided a fish. And that makes Jonah happy.

Why? Verse 6 tells us again, it eases his discomfort. It gives him shade from the sun. But here, let me slow down a little and try to show you what is going on in the original Hebrew.

That expression, to ease his discomfort, is literally to deliver him from his calamity. And when you hear that, your mind is meant to immediately think of the calamity Nineveh has just been delivered from.

Doesn't it? And what the text is doing is inviting us to compare Jonah's reaction to the Ninevites deliverance from their destruction and his reaction to his own deliverance from his discomfort.

[26 : 57] Now remember verse 1? When God delivered Nineveh from their calamity, Jonah gets very angry. But here in verse 6, when he gets a little plan to deliver him from his discomfort, he's very happy.

That's the contrast. We're meant to see Jonah saying, oh, I love it when the Lord is being merciful to me. It puts a smile on my face. But I frown when others get that.

I don't want God's kindness to benefit others, especially if I think it's at my expense. That's what we're meant to notice when we read verse 6. And that paves the way for what happens next.

God has provided a fish, he has provided a plant, but now verse 7, he provides a worm to gobble up that very same plant. And then verse 8, God turns up the heat and provides a scorching east wind known in the Middle East as a Sirocco.

Now these hot winds can be pretty oppressive, reaching speeds of up to 60 miles an hour. So imagine all wind blowing at you. So how do you think Jonah felt at this point?

[28 : 23] Unbelievable, he must have said. How dare God take away the very thing I need the most? And once again he gets angry. Once again he repeats his wish of verse 3, I will rather die.

God God is doing is getting ready to teach him a lesson about his self righteous heart and God's own patient heart.

So just like in verse 4, God asks, is it right for you to be angry about the plant? But this time Jonah answers verse 9.

It is, he said, and I'm so angry, I wish I were dead. What Jonah is really saying is this, yes, it is right for me to be angry.

This plant mattered a lot to me and now I'm suffering because it's gone. I would rather die than be without this plant. So the point Jonah is making is that the plant is worthy of life because it is important to him.

[29 : 34] That's the criteria. And now Jonah is in exactly the place where God wants him. God can now teach his lesson verses 10 and 11.

But the Lord said, you have been concerned about this plant though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh in which there are more than 120,000 people who cannot tell their right hand from their left and also many animals.

So here is God's point. Jonah, he says gently, you've been concerned about a plant, a plant you didn't tend to or grow.

You're concerned about a plant that has only been on this planet for 24 hours at most. But I, however, did plant and tend to and grow Nineveh.

And I didn't just do this for 24 hours but over many months and many years. And you know what? You care about one plant? Nineveh has 120,000 people.

[30 : 52] If you care and pity this poor plant, should I not care and pity all those people in Nineveh even more?

I understand you're upset over this plant, but if you can feel sorry over a relatively meaningless plant, should I not feel even sorrier for all these people made in my image, or even the animals for that matter?

Do you get it, Jonah? You see, we now get a glimpse into the very heart of God. God, by definition, does not need us.

He certainly doesn't need us to be happy in himself. We could be nothing more than meaningless plants to him. But how is it that God cares so much about Nineveh and Jerusalem and Kuching? How is it that our actions grieve him? The answer is that God has voluntarily attached his heart to us. To put it very simply, God loves us when he doesn't have to.

[32 : 06] And so he cares very much when it turns out we can't even tell our right hand from our left when we can't tell right from wrong. And he is very, very patient with us.

Isn't he extremely patient with Jonah over these four chapters? And doesn't that highlight his patience with Israel? Nineveh got 40 days.

Jeroboam, the king of Israel, his reign lasted 41 years. They had plenty of time to repent. And so Jonah has experienced what he refuses to give to Nineveh.

He refuses to emulate God's patient heart and display his mercy. So what does Jonah do?

The story doesn't tell us. It simply ends with God having the last word. And in so doing, the book is forcing us to ponder on what God says and to reflect on our hearts.

[33 : 14] What are we most concerned with? Sadly, sometimes we can be preoccupied with our small little world and the littlest things, can't we?

We all have our own versions of Jonah's plant, whether it is some possession, some hobby, some TV show, and we care about it a little too much and care about people a little too little.

As the writer William Hazlitt once put it, the least pain in our little finger gives us more concern than the destruction of millions of our fellow human beings.

But God says to us gently, my children, don't forget your mission. It is not about your comfort. It is about helping those around you know and experience my grace and mercy, love and forgiveness. And if that means people who are different from you, people who don't necessarily make you comfortable become part of the same church as you, so be it.

[34 : 32] After all, Jonah needs to get used to worshipping God alongside a Ninevite or two. And if our mission is to speak God's mercy, then we must also be ready to display God's mercy.

And so today, Jonah 4 is also getting us to reflect on our attitudes and to ask, am I an unforgiving person? When I look at others, others whom I judge to be foolish or even threatening to me, and when they end up getting into all sorts of difficulties, do I say, serves them right?

And yet, Jesus says, if you follow me, that cannot be the attitude. In Matthew chapter 18, Jesus tells a parable of a servant who was forgiven much, but who failed to show that same mercy to others, leading the king to be furious with him.

The point is clear. If you have received such mercy and forgiveness from the king of heaven, you cannot withhold it from anyone else. But as we close, you might still ask, how is it possible to show such mercy?

How is it possible to have God's heart? The answer lies in coming to the cross of Christ. For at the cross, we are reminded, first of all, how vast God's mercy towards us is.

[36 : 06] He paid for our sin, lavishly by sending not just anyone, but his beloved son. But more than that, second of all, at the cross, we are reminded justice and mercy are not enemies.

As Romans chapter 3 reminds us, the cross is not just a demonstration of God's mercy, it is a demonstration of God's justice. Sin is not overlook, but rightly condemn and punish.

The big difference is that it is condemned and punish in Jesus who offers himself to bear that anger as he bears your sin and my sin.

And if that is true, that means it is not just my sin that has been paid for. If anyone who has sinned against me is trusting in Christ, they have had their sin paid for by Christ too.

And so that means we don't punish them, we don't take revenge on them, because any payback is actually an offence against the cross.

[37 : 30] It is saying to Jesus, what you have done is not enough. It will be to make a mockery of God's mercy. So as we end, let me remind you what I said when I preached on Jonah chapter 1.

I said that I hope you will discover that this book is not so much about Jonah and the fish, but Jonah and his God, our God.

And I hope that it has caused us to deepen our appreciation of God's compassion and renew our zeal for his mission. And so this Christmas season, shall we do all we can to speak God's mercy?

And shall we do all we can to display God's mercy? Let's pray. Heavenly, Father, as we come to you now, we pray that you help our minds and our hearts to grasp the magnitude of your mercy, of just how big it is.

Father, we know that we need to see the bigness of your mercy so that we can similarly show that mercy to others. So give us a fresh vision of that mercy of yours shown at the cross and of that vindication that you have won for us so that we too can entrust all those hurts that we have, people who might have sinned against us, into your hands and instead be ready to speak your mercy and to show your mercy as a testimony to your grace.

[39 : 15] All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.