

God's Mercy

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[0 : 00] Hey, good morning, church. My name's Matthew Capone, and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church, and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

I want to highlight just a couple things before we start. First of all, if you're new with us, welcome. We're glad that you're here. We'd love for you to go to our website, which is at www.cmpca.net, and when you go there, there will be a pop-up that will give you a chance to go to our visitor form, and that will allow you to give us some more information about yourself and help us to connect with you. For everyone, both those of us who are new and those of us who have been here for a long time, I want to remind you, as I always do, that while we can see numbers, we can't always see names, and while you can see me, I can't see you, and so I encourage you right now to take a moment to greet one another in the comment section at the bottom right of the Facebook video.

You could just say something as simple as good morning or hear, share who's with you and where you're watching from, and that will give us the opportunity to have a sense of being present with each other even as we're separated, and it also gives us a chance to know who is with us this morning.

With that, we are in the book of Jonah, and we're coming near to the very end, and as I've told you many times now, the book of Jonah is not a book about a fish. The fish only appears four times in three verses, but instead it's a book that tells the story of a man named Jonah who lived in the 9th or 8th century B.C.

[1 : 25] in the northern kingdom of Israel, and he was given a command by God to go to the city of Nineveh, which was in Assyria, which is in modern-day northern Iraq. Now, of course, as we know now, Jonah was reluctant to do that, and he was reluctant for probably many reasons, one of which is that Assyria was an enemy of Israel.

It would be not too long until 722 B.C. when they would take the northern kingdom of Israel into exile. Of course, even more than a story about a man named Jonah, the book of Jonah is about God's mercy.

That's what we've seen in each chapter. In chapter 1, we saw how God's mercy is offensive. He shows it to people like Nineveh and the Assyrians, and he shows it to people like Jonah and people like you and me.

In chapter 2, we saw how God shows his mercy to his people when they run away from him. And we saw that even when we run away from God, he pursues us in his grace. Last week in chapter 3, we asked the question of how do we take hold of God's mercy?

How do we experience it? And we saw that we experience and take hold of God's mercy through repentance. Just as Nineveh was quick to repent, so we should be quick to repent as well.

[2 : 36] Now, if you're someone who watches mystery shows or reads mystery novels, maybe it's Sherlock, maybe it's NCIS, you know that at the very beginning of the episode, there's a lot of questions that are raised, or at the very beginning of the story, and there's things that aren't answered to the very end.

Jonah is going to work a little bit like that. We're at the end of the Jonah mystery. We weren't told at the very beginning of the story why exactly Jonah ran away, and we're going to find that out today in chapter 4.

And we're also going to find out the ultimate purpose of this book, why it's telling us so much about God's mercy. And if we really understand and know God's mercy, it's going to change us and shape us.

It's going to make us into different people than we are now. Mercy is actually a powerful force. And so if we experience it, we should expect it to change us as well. And that's what we're going to look

at here in Jonah chapter 4 before we saw God's mercy to us.

And in this chapter, we're going to take a look at God's mercy through us and from us. It's with that that we come to Jonah chapter 4, and I encourage you to turn with me, whether it's on another page on your internet browser, whether it's in your physical Bible or on your phone.

[3 : 52] Regardless of where you're opening it up, we are in Jonah chapter 4, starting at verse 1. And remember that this is God's word, and God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path.

In other words, God has not left us to stumble alone in the dark, but instead he's given us his word to show us the way to go. And so that's why we read together now, starting at verse 1.

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. 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.

Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live. And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry?

[4 : 50] 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.

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.

Verse 7. But when dawn came up the next day, God appointed a worm that attacked the plant so that it withered. 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. Verse 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. 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.

[5 : 53] 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?

I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that you've given to us, and we thank you for your mercy.

We thank you for your mercy that you show to us in Jesus Christ, and also the mercy you show to us by speaking to us and teaching us. We ask that you would do that for us this morning, that you'd send your Holy Spirit to help us, that we would be able to hear and understand clearly from your word, and that we would believe and know, and that you would help us to see Jesus as more beautiful than before.

And we ask all these things with confidence, because we ask them in Jesus' name. Amen. We start out here in chapter 4 with Jonah's anger.

We find out that he's angry, and there's actually a play on words that's happening. At the very end of chapter 3, we saw in verse 10, when God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

[7 : 12] So God has shown this mercy, and this word here of disaster in verse 10, is the same word in Hebrew that's used for evil way. So we might say it this way, when God saw what they did, how they turned from their disaster, God relented of his disaster.

And then the play on words continues in chapter 4, because this displeased word in verse 1, is that same word for disaster. In other words, God held back his disaster from Nineveh, and Jonah considered that to be a disaster.

God's mercy makes Jonah incredibly angry. God holds back from punishing evil. Jonah thinks that is evil. Jonah thinks that God turning from evil is terrible.

He thinks God's mercy is terrible. And so we find here the secret is finally revealed in verse 2. We weren't told in chapter 1 why it was that Jonah disobeyed God.

We just knew that he was an upside-down, inside-out prophet. But we're told in verse 2, finally, with the end of our mystery, why it is that he did this. It says, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country?

[8 : 23] 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. In other words, Jonah ran away because he knew this was what was going to happen.

Jonah ran away because he knew God was going to use him to show mercy, and that was the last thing Jonah wanted to participate in. Jonah wants to receive God's mercy, but he has no interest in showing God's mercy.

Jonah wants to receive God's mercy, but he has no interest in receiving God's mercy. Of course, there's an irony here because his quotation about God's steadfast love comes from Exodus chapter 34 when he says this statement about God being gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

How does he know that God is merciful and gracious? Well, he knows it from the history of the nation of Israel. Near the end of the chapter, the book of Exodus in chapters 32 through 34, that's where we see the episode of Moses going up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. And it's when he goes up to receive the Ten Commandments that the people of Israel worship the golden calf. God's judgment is meant to come upon them, but instead he shows them mercy.

[9 : 43] And so Jonah is recalling God's character based on a time that he did not bring a disaster on Israel. And so Jonah is okay with mercy being shown to Israel.

He just doesn't want it shown to anyone else. His anger isn't over all of God's mercy. It's just over God's mercy to people he doesn't think deserve it.

And so that raises a question for us as well. Jonah's looking back to the end of Exodus when God showed mercy to Israel. Can you remember, if you're a Christian, when God has shown mercy to you?

Israel was in need of mercy. If you're someone who follows after Jesus, you consider yourself to be someone who needs mercy as well. Is that a distant memory? Is it a distant memory in the way that it was for Jonah, something from far back in history?

Or is it something that's fresh for you now? Was God's mercy something you needed once? Or something that you realized you need over and over again?

[10 : 55] Part of what's going on here for Jonah is a perspective that's twisted. Israel desperately needed God's mercy.

Jonah desperately needs God's mercy. And so that should move him to want mercy for others as well. And that's not what happens here for Jonah.

He's going to be a negative example for us throughout this entire chapter. And instead, he runs off in a pouting fit. He tells God he wants him to take his life from him. Verse three, like an angry child here, and the Lord, like a parent, asks him a rhetorical question.

Do you do well to be angry? Verse four. What is this doing for you? How is your anger working out for you? Is this really the way that you should be responding to that?

Passive-aggressive, Jonah runs off in a huff. It doesn't answer God's question. But instead, he runs away from the very city that he's supposed to be showing mercy to. He goes to the east, and he sets up camp.

[12 : 04] What's happening here is Jonah is tailgating. He's tailgating for the big game. He's holding out hope that even though God has shown mercy up to this point, he may, in fact, bring judgment.

And Jonah wants to be able to have a great viewpoint. He wants to have good seats to the game. He is hoping that the season of God's judgment is not canceled. And in fact, he is ready here for the Super Bowl.

He's ready for the judgment Super Bowl. He hopes that somehow God's mercy won't last, and he'll be able to have the pleasure of watching Nineveh be destroyed.

Jonah doesn't understand how ridiculous this is. He doesn't understand the irony of him quoting a statement from God that came from when God showed him and showed the people of Israel mercy. And just like us, from time to time, Jonah here lacks some self-awareness. And so God is going to use an object lesson. He's going to use an illustration to teach Jonah.

[13 : 07] Of course, here we see him continuing to pursue Jonah in the same way that he pursued him with the fish. We'll see some familiar language here. In chapter 1, verse 17, we heard that God had appointed a fish to save Jonah.

And we're going to see that same word repeated over and over here. First of all, we see that God appoints a plant. Verse 6. Verse 7, he's going to appoint a worm.

Verse 8, he's going to appoint a scorching wind and sun. And this reminds us of another theme besides God's mercy that runs throughout this book, which is that he is the God who's in control of the heavens and the earth.

He's the God with incredible power. He's the God who's able to do whatever he wants to do. In fact, Jonah knows this because he's already confessed it in chapter 1. In verse 9, he tells the sailors that he belongs to the God of heaven who made the sea and the dry land.

And so it shouldn't surprise us that God continues to use that power to chase after Jonah. But we should be encouraged and also humbled by the fact that that is what God does with his power.

[14:18] At this point, he could smite Jonah just like he could have done in chapter 1 or chapter 2. But he continues to pursue this confused, negligent, irresponsible, tone-deaf prophet who has run away from the very thing God wants him to do.

And even when he returns to it, he lacks God's heart and his compassion. God continues to pursue Jonah, which is good news because it means that even when we lack self-awareness, even when we get things wrong and miss the mark, God pursues us as well.

But this pursuit is not easy. First of all, there's a plant that comes up to protect Jonah.

Verse 6, and we see this contrast, this irony that God is creating. Because in verse 1, we saw that it was displeasing to Jonah exceedingly. He had this strong negative emotion when God showed mercy to Nineveh.

Now, verse 6, it's exceedingly glad is how we're told Jonah feels. So Jonah was upset when God showed mercy to Nineveh. He's glad when God shows mercy to him.

[15:34] There's a double standard here for Jonah that God is highlighting and calling attention to you. He's angry at God's mercy to Nineveh for saving them from disaster.

He has pleasure at God's mercy to him, saving him from disaster. And then God, to drive the point home, appoints a worm, verse 7, to take away this plant.

And then he allows Jonah to face his own sort of disaster, a scorching wind and a sun in verse 8.

And Jonah once again says it's better for him to die than to live.

By the way, in verse 6, when it says that God saved Jonah from his discomfort, that word discomfort continues the play on words that we've been seeing.

Because discomfort is the same Hebrew word used of evil way in chapter 3, verse 10. It's the same Hebrew word used of disaster in chapter 3, verse 10.

[16:33] And it's the same word that's used of Jonah's displeasure in chapter 4, verse 6. Sorry, it's displeasure in chapter 4, verse 1.

So Jonah is upset when God saves Nineveh from disaster, but he's glad when God saves him from his discomfort or his disaster.

And so God is making this point. It's good for me to destroy a people, but it's wrong for me to destroy a plant.

It's wrong for me to show people mercy from death, but it's good to show you mercy just from the heat of the day. It's wrong for me to show Nineveh mercy, but it's good to save you from the weather.

What's going on, Jonah? Can you begin to see the upside-down values of your heart? Can you begin to see that you value small things, but you can't value great things?

[17:43] It's not just this entire story. That's inside-out. It's not just the prophet that's inside-out, but it's Jonah's priorities here.

Jonah is inside-out. He prioritizes his own comfort, his own pleasure, but he can't even bring himself to care for people. And choosing pleasure over people is part of what God is emphasizing here and showing in this narrative.

He's using this illustration to help Jonah understand how ridiculous, how pouty, and how selfish he is. And then he ends with this great question that's left unanswered.

We're actually left with a cliffhanger at the end of this chapter. I told you earlier that it was like a mystery story where everything's revealed at the end, but it's also not like a mystery story because the threads are not all brought together.

In fact, we're left with tension at the very end of this chapter. We're left with an unanswered question and an unfinished story. In verse 10, the Lord gives him this question, Verse 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?

[19 : 21] You care about a plant. How much more should I care about people? And this cliffhanger is left there to direct the story ultimately not to Jonah, but to us.

And so God's question to Jonah is also his question to us. What about us? How do we see people who are different from us?

Do we want them to experience God's mercy? Do we care more about our pleasure? Or do we care more about people? And when we look at other people, do we see them as God sees them?

Do we see them as people who don't know their left hand from their right? Verse 11. The point here that God is making is that when he looks out on sinful humanity, as much as his judgment and his justice are real, as we saw in chapters 1 through 3, his compassion is real as well.

He sees people who are confused. He sees people who don't know the right way to walk in this world. They are so ignorant that they don't know the basics of distinguishing their left hand from their right hand.

[20 : 40] Of course, the irony here is that as we've seen, Jonah, in many ways, also does not know his left hand from his right hand. And so what do we do with the world around us?

What do we do with people who don't share our faith and our convictions? How do we think about them and how do we treat them? How do we speak about and think about people who don't share our convictions and our practices around sexual identity, sexual ethics?

Do we see them as people who don't know their left hand from their right hand? Or do we joke about them? Do we post cutting remarks on the internet or social media?

Is our first instinct in the logical contradictions of their position? Or, like God, are we able to say, man, there are hundreds of thousands of people who don't know their left hand from their right?

People who need God's mercy just as much as you and I do. What's our response when we think about people who abuse drugs?

[21 : 55] Do we laugh at them? Do we look down on them? Or do we see people who know only one way to cover up the pain in their lives?

Do we hurt for them? Do we want them, like God wants Nineveh here, to turn and experience God's mercy? Do we have God's heart of forgiveness and compassion towards them?

Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons? Of course, there's many more people than that in our world and throughout history who don't know God.

What is our attitude towards people who don't share our political convictions? Do we think they're morally inferior? Do we think that they're idiots who need to be mocked?

Or do we see them as people like us, desperately in need of God's mercy? Do we realize that, like Jonah, we often get it wrong?

[23 : 09] And yet God continues to pursue us and show his mercy to us as well. Are we like Jonah, lacking self-awareness, not realizing how hard-hearted we are, not listening to the words that come out of our mouths about the people in the communities around us?

What's our attitude towards people who have different cultures, come from different races than we do? That's probably part of what's going on here for Jonah.

He's a Hebrew. These people are Assyrians. Does our heart go out for everyone in the world or only for people who look like us?

And do we want people to adopt our culture or do we want them to adopt Jesus as their Lord and their Savior? Do we pride ourselves over others like Jonah did?

Priding ourselves in the fact that we belong to God, that we keep his rules and his laws, and yet forget that mercy and compassion are a part of God's rules and his laws.

[24 : 25] They reveal his heart. They're part of what he cares about. Do we take pride in our own positions and forget God's love for people?

If we do, then like Jonah, there's nothing to take pride in. But instead, we need to hear the same question directed at us. Do we pity plants more than we pity people?

Do we understand God's mercy in such a way that we know how desperately we need it and we want to see it extended to other people?

This ultimately is what we see in our Lord Jesus. We're told in Matthew chapter 9 that Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

And then in verse 36, we're told this, when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

[25 : 33] Then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

Jesus looks out on the world and he shares with his father in heaven, not just divinity, but also his heart for people.

He sees people who are rebellious, people who are sinful. And while he comes to bring judgment, he also sees them as harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

Are we able and willing to see the world and the people around us in the same way? Are we able to remember as Jonah forgets that we are harassed and helpless and Jesus has become our shepherd?

Jonah here serves as a negative example to show us that mercy and God's compassion towards us should shape us and form us into people who have compassion and show compassion.

[26 : 48] If Jesus, who was sinless, saw the world around him as harassed and helpless, how much more should we who are sinful and wicked but have received God's mercy feel the same way?

If we understand God's compassion to us, how much more should we show compassion to others?

If we know that we have nothing to offer to God, should we not recognize that others who have nothing to offer to him deserve, not deserve but can receive his mercy as well?

God's compassion comes through Jesus Christ. It comes to us and as we understand it and as it shapes us, it should come through us as well. One man puts it this way, are we disciples of Jesus or are we disciples of Jonah?

We come to understand here at the end of this whole book that God's mercy has a shaping force, it has a power and it's meant to shape us and form us to be merciful people and so we have to ask these same questions that are pointed at Jonah.

Do we care about people more than plants or pleasure? Do we remember God's mercy to us and does that move us to show mercy to others?

[28 : 16] And when we don't, do we remember that God is patient with us as he's patient with Jonah and that Jesus continues to pursue us but as and if he pursues us, we expect him to continue to change our hearts and to soften us and to mold us.

Jesus tells a sobering story in Matthew chapter 18 about an unforgiving servant and in the story, there's a king and this king has a servant who has a great debt.

His debt is 10,000 talents. The king goes to this servant and he threatens him. He orders him to sell his wife and his children and all that he had but in verse 26, the servant falls on his knees imploring this king to have mercy and so this king does.

He has mercy on the servant and he forgives the debt. But then this servant goes to another servant who owes him not talents but denarii, a much lower amount of money, exponentially smaller.

This other servant owes him 100 denarii whereas he owed 10,000 talents. But instead of showing that other servant the mercy he'd received, he chokes him and says, pay what you owe and he refused to show the mercy that he receives.

[29 : 39] Well, in the end of this story, the king hears about what has happened and he summons this servant and tells him, you wicked servant, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had mercy on you?

And in anger, his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt. Brothers and sisters, God has shown us mercy in Jesus Christ.

He means for that mercy to be a shaping and powerful forming experience for us that we would not just be recipients of mercy but we'd be people who show mercy.

In fact, we see in this story, Matthew chapter 18, that that's what he expects of people who follow him. that we'd receive mercy from Jesus and it'd be revealed that we know and understand and experience that mercy as we show it to other people around us.

Mercy is a powerful changing and shaping force and it tells us that people who receive mercy are people who show mercy. And so we look at the end of Jonah chapter 4 and we read God's question.

[31 : 02] 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?

And of course, the answer is yes. God has shown us compassion and we want him to show others compassion as well. We have received Jesus' mercy and we hope and ask and pray that everyone around us would receive that same mercy.

And so Jonah is not a book about a fish and it's not ultimately a book about Jonah but it's a book about God's mercy to us and it asks this question, is God's mercy shown through us as well? Please pray with me. Our Father in heaven, we thank you for your word. We thank you for your mercy and we confess that even though we've received it, often like Jonah, we're slow and hard-hearted to show it.

We ask that you would send your Holy Spirit now to work in our hearts to soften them and to shape us to be people who haven't just received Jesus' compassion but we show Jesus' compassion.

[32 : 22] that we would want your love and your forgiveness for everyone around us and that would affect the way that we interact with them, think about them and talk about them.

We thank you that you talk about us with gracious words and you do that not because we have earned it or deserved it but because we ask it in the mighty name of Jesus.

Amen. We end our time together with a benediction and you'll remember that a benediction is a good word from God.

It's a word that's true in the midst of a world filled with words that are not true. It's tradition for the minister to hold up his hand to send out God's blessing on God's people and for God's people to hold out their hands to receive God's blessing and so I invite you now even as you're connected to me through a screen to hold out your hands and hear now God's good word over you from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful.

[33 : 37] He will surely do it. Amen. Thanks so much and I look forward to seeing you all very soon.