

Introduction

Opening Scripture: [Psalm 103:8-13](#).

Augustine of Hippo wrote more candidly than perhaps any other Christian in church history. He wrote a book titled *Confessions*, in which he recounted his sins as a teenager and young man. He confessed his lust as a teenager and his ongoing sexual immorality as an adult. In the second section of *Confessions*, he wrote about stealing from a neighbor. He contemplated that he did not sin out of need; he sinned out of a desire to sin. “Yet I lusted to steal, and did it, compelled by no hunger, nor poverty, but through a closedness of well-doing, and a pamperedness of iniquity. For I stole that, of which I had enough, and much better. Nor cared I to enjoy what I stole, but joyed in the theft and sin itself” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2.4).

One thing Augustine knew well was God’s mercy. Most people tend to view the sins of others as greater than the sins of self. We say, ‘I know I am a sinner, but not a sinner like my neighbor.’ As Augustine reflected on his life in *Confessions*, he frequently acknowledged that God’s judgment against him was only delayed so God could display His mercy in him. In reality, **we all deserve God’s wrath** and **we all need God’s mercy**.

Context

Jonah experienced and saw God’s mercy. When God called Jonah to preach to Nineveh, Jonah fled from His presence. In His mercy, God prevented Jonah from fleeing. When Jonah was thrown overboard and began sinking to his death, God was merciful and appointed a fish to swallow Jonah and deliver him to dry land. When he finally preached in Nineveh about God’s judgment against their sin, the Ninevites believed God and repented. God had mercy on Nineveh and spared them from destruction.

Main idea

In [Jonah 4](#), we finally get to see what Jonah and God think about Nineveh. Unfortunately, they have very different thoughts about the people of Nineveh. **Church**, *do we share God’s view of people?*

Jonah did not care for the people of Nineveh. In fact, he was disappointed that they would **not** be destroyed. Even God admitted that they were an evil city, deserving judgment ([Jon 1:2](#); [3:4](#)). Also, they were Israel’s enemies. They opposed God and they opposed Israel. *Why would Jonah want them to be spared?*

God, however, loved the people of Nineveh. In fact, this is why He sent Jonah to preach to them. The facts were not different from God’s perspective. They opposed God and Israel.

They deserved judgment. Yet, God loved them. [Jonah 4](#) teaches us that **no one is beyond God's love**.

God is Good

First, we see read that the basis of the disagreement is because **God is good**. Jonah was not surprised that God forgave the Ninevites. This action fit well with God's nature. In fact, when God initially called Jonah to go to Nineveh, his first thought was God's goodness. **Church**, our view of people should reflect God's goodness. Just as He is gracious and merciful to all people, we should be gracious and merciful to all people.

Jonah's anger

What did Jonah think about God forgiving Nineveh? **Jonah was angry that God had forgiven Nineveh.** [Jonah 4:1-2](#) "1 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 ..."

As we begin reading Jonah, we can only speculate about Jonah's motives for rejecting God's call. We may speculate that Jonah was afraid; the Ninevites had an awful reputation. We may speculate that was self-interested, that he had other plans for his life and God's call was an inconvenience.

Now, by Jonah's admission, we know why he fled from God's call. **Jonah did not want God to forgive Nineveh.** Nineveh was the greatest city of the Assyrian Empire. Soon it would become the capital. Assyria had a reputation. When they conquered other nations and tribes, they would execute them in public as a message to other nations. Nineveh was an evil city.

Additionally, the Assyrians were Israel's enemies. In fact, in the next generation, the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel, including Jonah's hometown, Gath-Hepher. Jonah fled so they would not hear God's warning. If there was no warning, there would be no repentance and no forgiveness (see [Rom 10:14-17](#)). **Jonah wanted Nineveh to be destroyed.**

God's nature

Why did Jonah expect God to forgive Nineveh? **Jonah knew that God was good to undeserving people.** [Jonah 4:2-4](#) "... 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?"

Notice how Jonah describes God's nature. The Lord is **gracious**; He gives good to those who don't deserve it. The Lord is **merciful**; He spares undeserving people from condemnation.

The Lord is **slow to anger**; He allows people opportunities to repent. The Lord abounds in steadfast **love**; He is faithful to His people. The Lord **relents** from disaster; He spares those who repent and believe Him.

This is how God described Himself in [Exodus 34:6](#) "...The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness." This description is repeated throughout the OT ([Num 14:18](#); [2 Chr 30:9](#); [Neh 9:17](#); [Ps 86:15](#); [103:8](#); [111:4](#); [112:4](#); [116:5](#); [145:8](#); [Joel 2:13](#)). Jonah had learned from Scripture that **God was good to undeserving people**.

Jonah would rather die than see the Ninevites forgiven. *How could it be that God would judge the Israelites but forgive the Ninevites? Habakkuk wrestled with this same dilemma. How could God use the Babylonians to judge Israel?* **Jonah understood that God was good, but he had a distorted view of God's goodness.** Jonah knew that **God was good to undeserving people**; he just did not agree that God **should be** good to them.

Reflection

Church, we should reflect God's nature in our thinking and our actions. *How do you view those from a different political leaning? How do you view those who have different theological views?* The Ninevites were polytheists who were Israel's political enemies.

Listen to [Matthew 5:43-45](#) "43 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your **neighbor** [Israel] and hate your **enemy** [Nineveh].' 44 But I say to you, **Love your enemies** and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be **sons of your Father** who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.'" We should not only love those who are easy to love. **We should live as sons of God, loving even our enemies.**

Jonah loves himself

So, how will God teach Jonah about loving others? **God shows Jonah that He has mercy on whomever He chooses.** Jonah seemed to have a view that God should be merciful to Israel, but not Nineveh. He should be merciful to "good" people, but not "bad" people. In reality, Jonah did not deserve God's mercy more than the Ninevites. **Church**, we would do well to remember that we have a relationship with God because of His grace, not our merit.

God's grace

God shows mercy to Jonah. [Jonah 4:5-6](#) "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."

Notice how God was gracious to Jonah. Jonah watched to see what would happen to Nineveh ([Jon 4:5](#)). Maybe God will change His mind again. Maybe He will still destroy the Ninevites. After all, in Jonah's eyes, they still deserve destruction.

God caused a plant to grow to provide shade for Jonah. Jonah had already built a shelter from the sun; however, the plant apparently provided even greater protection from the heat. Don't overlook the significance of **how the plant grew**. [Jonah 4:6](#) "6 Now the Lord God **appointed** a plant and made it come up over Jonah ..." Just as God "**appointed** a great fish" to save Jonah ([Jon 1:17](#)), He now **appoints** a plant to shade Jonah. In His sovereignty over creation, God was merciful to Jonah.

God removes grace

Then, **God removes His mercy from Jonah**. [Jonah 4:7-8](#) "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.""

The next day, God **appointed** a worm to destroy the plant He had **appointed**. Then God **appointed** an east wind and intense heat on Jonah. Jonah said that he would be better off dead. God had mercy on his enemies, now he has to sit in the heat and wait for destruction that isn't coming.

God is sovereign in grace and in judgment. God told Moses, [Exodus 33:19](#) "... I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." **God's sovereignty is displayed throughout Jonah**. God's will is sovereign over Jonah's desire to flee. God's will is sovereign in determining whether Jonah drowns. His will is sovereign in determining whether Jonah sits in the shade or sits in the sun.

How much more then is God sovereign in showing mercy to Nineveh? Jonah tried to prevent God's mercy to Nineveh by fleeing. Jonah tried to prevent God's mercy to Nineveh by complaining about God's mercy. **Jonah does not decide if Nineveh will receive mercy; God decides.**

Reflection

Aren't you glad that God, no one else, determines who receives God's mercy? People **can be** merciful, but God **is** to be merciful.

Church, we must be careful that we do not try to select who would receive God's mercy. I have shared before about **William Carey's** desire to take the gospel to India. When he proposed the idea to a group of pastors, one pastor told him, "Young man, sit down; when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine." We cannot be selective about who hears of God's judgment and God's mercy. We can not refuse to go to

India, Nineveh, or Greenbrier. He will show mercy and compassion to whomever He chooses, even the Ninevites.

God loves His enemies

What does God want Jonah to learn from the plant and the worm? Jonah is right about Nineveh; they are enemies of God and of Israel. But **God loves His enemies**. God appointed the plant for mercy and the worm for judgment to teach Jonah that He alone decides who receives His mercy. **Church**, like Jonah, we were enemies of God. It is only by God's mercy that we are reconciled with Him.

Jonah's compassion

Whom does Jonah love? **Jonah loved the plant more than the people.** [Jonah 4:9-10](#) "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."

Two things have now made Jonah **angry** in chapter 4. He was angry that the plant died ([Jon 4:9](#)) and angry that the Ninevites did not ([Jon 4:1](#)). Notice that Jonah had **compassion** (pity) for the plant. Jonah loved the plant. Jonah's prayer in [Jonah 2](#) and his confession in [Jonah 4:2](#) show that Jonah had **good theology, but he did not love people. Good theology without love is bad theology.**

Notice how God highlights the **pettiness** of Jonah's anger. Jonah did not make the plant; God did. The plant belonged to God, not Jonah. The plant grew in a night and died in a night. *How had Jonah developed such a love for this plant that he had known for only a day?* Of course, the irony that we see as the reader see that Jonah didn't really love the plant; he loved Jonah.

Church, we must honestly evaluate what we **do** as a church. We have three major responsibilities as a church. First, all that we do should be for the glory of God by exalting Christ. Second, we exist as a church for building up one another. We don't join a church just so we can be built up, we join so we can build up others as well. Third, we exist to make disciples of Jesus. It is easy for a church to become self-focused over time and our activities will reflect that self-focus. **Jonah loved himself, but not others.**

God's love

Whom does God love? **God loves His enemies.** [Jonah 4:11](#) "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?"

God has frequently called Nineveh a great city. We now read that more than 120,000 people lived there. *What does God mean by they don't know their right from their left?* The people of Nineveh do not know right from wrong. They have distorted God's view of right. We see this in [Jonah 1:2](#) "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it, for their evil has come up before me." In His mercy, God does not intend to leave them in this state.

Jonah had not made the plant; it did not belong to him. God made the people of Nineveh; they belonged to Him. Although the Ninevites had rejected God and His will, God had compassion on them by sending Jonah to warn them of judgment against their sins.

Christ's death

How has God shown His love to us? **God shows His love for us through Jesus's death for us.** [Romans 5:6-10](#) "6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life."

For whom did Christ die? [Romans 5:6](#) "... Christ died for the **ungodly**." [Romans 5:8](#) "... we were still **sinners**, Christ died for us." [Romans 5:10](#) "... while we were **enemies** we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son ..." **Jesus died for God's enemies.** *Who are God's enemies?* We all were God's enemies by our willful rejection of God and His will.

What does Jesus's death reveal about God? [Romans 5:8](#) "8 but God shows his **love** for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Jesus's death reveals the extent of God's love for us. God loves us **in spite of** our rebellion against Him.

Reflection

Church, we must always remember that we do not know God because of our merit. God did not reconcile us to Himself because we were good; God reconciled us to Himself **because He is good**. God does not give us eternal life because we deserve to live forever; God gives us eternal life **because He is gracious and merciful** to us.

When Christ died for me, I was not passive about God; I had rejected God and His will. I was God's enemy because I chose to live life by my rules, not God's word. While I was God's enemy, while I was a sinner, Christ died for me. *Why?* Because **God loved me, His enemy**.

Unbeliever, if you want to be reconciled in your relationship with God, you desire a good thing. Do not seek that relationship through your own worth or personal ethic. Trust in the atoning death of Jesus. Trust that Jesus's death is able to forgive all of your sins. Trust that God is gracious and merciful to those who seek Him through faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

Reflection

Augustine wrote about his mother's prayers for him before he came to faith. "That chaste, holy, and sober widow, (such as [You] love), already more cheerful in her hopes, but no more sparing in her tears and lamentations, ceased not to weep for me before [you] in all the hours of her prayers." He also said she "wept for me before [You], far more than do mothers who weep at bodily deaths." Augustine's mother was **burdened** for him to have faith in God, so she prayed and wept for him. Augustine credited God's response to his mother's prayers as one of the major factors that led to his faith.

Church, we should love those whom God loves. *How many things in life drive us to anger or to tears? We lament death and suffering, strife with family, difficulties at work, etc. Do we lament those who are separated from God because they do not know the gospel or reject the gospel? **Do we weep and pray for their salvation?***

The tears we shed or lack of tears we shed for the lost reflect our love for others.

Summary

Jonah was angry that God spared his enemies. He was angry that God spared **God's** enemies. [Jonah 4](#) shows us that **no one is beyond God's love**. He loves Jonah, even in his rebellion. He loves Nineveh, even in their sin. He shows His love for you and I in that while we were enemies, Christ died for us.

Closing Scripture: [Ephesians 2:4-5](#) "4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, 5 even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—"