

God's Unfair Mercy

Jonah 4:1-11

14 May 2017 | Grace Bible Church Corinda | Ben Shannon

Big Question: Is it fair for God to be merciful to wicked people?

Big Idea: God's mercy is equally unfair to us all.

Introduction

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* is often regarded as one of the great masterpieces of the nineteenth century.

Of course, I'm only talking about the book here.

The musical just has the same riff repeated over and over again.

And we all know that the actors in the movie couldn't sing.

It's a weighty story dealing with significant things: poverty, abuse, theft, prostitution, civil war and most importantly, mercy.

The main character – Jean Valjean – was gaoled for stealing a loaf of bread.

After he's served his time, he's released but as an ex-prisoner, his card is marked. Literally.

He ends up homeless because no innkeeper will take a former villain in.

Eventually though, a bishop gives him food and shelter in his hour of need.

It turns out that the innkeepers' fears are well founded though.

Because in the middle of the night, Valjean gets up, steals the bishop's silver cutlery before legging it over the garden wall and it into the night.

It's staggering that Valjean would steal from a priest who'd shown him such kindness.

The next morning, the bishop discovers that the silver is missing and it doesn't take him long to work out what's happened.

Soon after, there's a knock on the door.

During the night, the police discovered Valjean acting suspiciously, discovered the silver and brought him in for questioning.

When the bishop lays eyes on Valjean, he says:

"I am glad to see you. Well, but how is this? I gave you the candlesticks too, which are of silver like the rest, and for which you can certainly get two hundred francs. Why did you not carry them away with your forks and spoons?"

Jean Valjean opened his eyes wide, and stared at the venerable Bishop with an expression which no human tongue can render any account of.¹

Valjean is shocked, just like we're meant to be.

Most of us would probably want to have his guts for garters.

He's stolen a massive amount from a kind bishop who has every right to want the book thrown at him.

But not the priest. He offers Valjean even more – 'take the silver candlesticks as well!'

It's a 'wow' moment that sets up the rest of the book.

It's shocking that someone who's been wronged would show that kind of mercy.

Yet no one says, "That's not fair!", not even the housekeeper who moments earlier were complaining bitterly about the theft.

Instead, everyone is in awe of the bishop's mercy.

In that scene, Victor Hugo introduces us to the kind of scandalous mercy that we're going to be confronted by in the book of Jonah this morning.

Outline

This's the last sermon in our series looking at God's scandalous mercy through the book of Jonah.

In chapter one, we saw that God's mercy is unstoppable.

In chapter two, we saw that God's mercy is unexpected.

In chapter three, we saw that God's mercy is unbeatable.

Now, in chapter four, we see that God's mercy is unfair.

Jonah four tackles a hugely important question: Is it fair for God to be merciful to wicked people?

The big idea is:

God's mercy is equally unfair to us all.

The passage breaks up into two parts:

- Jonah's Complaint (1-4)
- God's Comeback (5-11)

Jonah's Complaint (4:1-4)

In the first four verses of chapter four, Jonah complains that God's mercy isn't fair.

Chapter three finishes on a high.

Jonah goes to the city of Nineveh and begins preaching judgment to them.

Just one day into his preaching tour, the whole city repents *en masse*.

Everyone – EVERYONE from the King to the peasants – recognises their wickedness and call out to God for mercy.

And the result is that fire doesn't come down from heaven, the ground doesn't open up and swallow the whole place and everything in it.

God relents. Lives are saved.

A prophet of God would have to chalk that up as a win, wouldn't they?

Isn't that exactly the kind of situation that missionaries dream of and hope for?

That's precisely the kind of revival that our hearts cry out to see in our own city today – a mass of people turning and worshipping God.

Surely a prophet who experienced that would be on cloud nine?

Not Jonah, though.

Quit the opposite – he's not a happy chappy.

When he sees that God relents, he blows his top, does his nut.

While God's anger towards the Ninevites has been calmed, at the same time Jonah's absolutely furious.

He's upset because God's anger isn't burning against the Assyrians.

For Jonah, disaster hasn't been avoided, it's been realised!

Often, we're most intensely angry when we think we've been truly wronged.

Jonah's angry because he's convinced that God's done the wrong thing.

Isn't that why God's attention was drawn to them in the first place?²

It's very hard to argue that these were good people - they were quite clearly wicked to the core.

The Assyrians deserved judgment, didn't they?

If God's going to be just, shouldn't their wickedness result in judgment?

Jonah clearly thinks that their wickedness needs to be dealt with, not forgiven.

So, he feels 100% justified in feeling angry when they're not judged.

Jonah's response is to pray to the Lord.

That might seem strange at first.

Jonah only does that when he's in a pickle.

But he thinks he's got God in the dock, so he doesn't hold back from having a good whinge and telling God exactly what's on his mind.

Finally – in chapter four – we're finally told why Jonah didn't want to go to Nineveh but fled in the opposite direction towards Tarshish.

It wasn't that Jonah simply refused to go and preach to foreigners.

It wasn't really that Jonah was worried about what the Ninevites might do to him when he preached judgment – though I'm sure that would've been on his mind.

The reason he ran is that he thought that God might be compassionate, verse 2:

Jonah 4:2 (NIV)² He prayed to the LORD, "Isn't this what I said, LORD, when I was still at home? That is what I tried to forestall by fleeing to Tarshish.

Jonah knows exactly what the God of the Bible is like.

He describes God by quoting from Exodus 34:6-7:

Jonah 4:2b (NIV) I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.

Yahweh is the God who is kind to people who are disadvantaged.

He's the one who offers compassion: he's concerned about people and he really cares for them.

He's the one who patiently waits to show love. His love doesn't give up.

Jonah's description of God is totally the opposite of what Jonah himself does.

God is slow to anger. More literally, he has long nostrils.

People's nostrils flare when they're angry, but God's "long nostrils" take a lot to get going.

Jonah flies off the handle and has a tantrum whenever he doesn't get his own way.

Jonah knew that God's usual method is to show mercy – and that's what stopped him from being obedient to God's mission.

I suspect that the reason he went the second time wasn't because he was repentant and obedient but because he thought God had come around to his way of thinking.

The message of pure judgment wouldn't leave room for mercy and so he thought judgment was definitely coming.

Yet, God worked through that and now he's seen that his worst fears have been realized.

Just as important as what Jonah does say is what he doesn't say.

Jonah's edits Moses' words in Exodus 34, where he declares that God is also the one who will justly punish the wicked:

Exodus 34:7b (NIV)⁷ Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation."

By leaving that part out, Jonah is accusing God of only doing half his job.

He thinks that Yahweh is the God of compassion, but not of judgment.

Jonah's problem is with the character of God.

He dislikes that God doesn't show judgment on Israel's enemies.

How could the Assyrians be allowed to just say "sorry" and then walk away scot free?

Why should they deserve mercy?

He doesn't think that God's being fair.

So Jonah lays down the gauntlet for God, giving him an ultimatum.

He doesn't want to live in a world where Israel's enemies are let off.

"It's me or them!"

It's either the Ninevites or him. But not both.

He doesn't really want to die, like he says in verse 3, but he does want God to change his mind.

It's a pretty childish tactic really, trying to get your own way by making an ultimatum, yet God continues to patiently deal with Jonah.

You kind of expect that God would give him a wake-up call.

Instead, he asks, "Should you really be that worked up about this?"

"What good does it produce?"

Verse 4:

Jonah 4:4 (NIV)⁴ But the LORD replied, "Is it right for you to be angry?"

Let's think about Jonah's complaint.

Because he's right, well, partly right anyway.

Guilty people being let off isn't fair.

Actually, there's nothing fair about mercy.

Mercy by its very definition isn't fair.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines mercy like this:

"Clemency and compassion shown... to a person with no right or claim to receive kindness; kind and compassionate treatment in a case where severity is merited or expected[.]"

In our household, we're used to tantrums that go something like this: "It's not fair! Blah, blah, blah."

And that's just Courtney and I. Then the kids join in.

Many of us probably feel exactly like Jonah, at least sometimes.

But be careful what you ask for.

Do you really want mercy to be fair?

Compare Jonah's prayers in chapter two and chapter four.

When he disobeys God and ends up in the drink he calls out to God for mercy.

God responds by sending a great fish to rescue him.

And Jonah responds with a prayer of praise.

But when the Ninevites realise that their wickedness deserves judgment, they repent, God relents and Jonah complains.

The truly scandalous thing here isn't that God's mercy is unfair, it's Jonah's response to it.

Like most of us, Jonah's incredibly inconsistent.

Did he really want God to leave him floundering in the ocean when he needed help?

After Jonah chose death by refusing to call out to God, it would've been fair if he was left there.

But God rescued him.

Jonah has the same double standard that we all have.

We're all happy to see other people receive their just desserts, but we hate getting them ourselves.

We want to be shown mercy, but we don't want to show it to others.

Jonah's thinking is dangerous and destructive because it actually denies the goodness of God's unfair mercy.

What right does Jonah have to receive mercy when he won't show it to others?

That comes from thinking that we somehow deserve God's mercy more than other people.

Which is ironic, because if we deserved God's mercy we wouldn't need it!

Jonah doesn't fully account for the fact that he is a sinner too, in need of God's grace.

He can't think that he deserves God's mercy just because he's an Israelite.

The people of Israel continually needed prophets to call them back to God.

Time and again, they needed a fresh start, second-, third- and seventy-seventh chances.

And we're no different.

We all need mercy because we're not right with God.

And if we expect God to show mercy to us, then we must show it to others.

If we truly experienced the unfairness of God's mercy, that's what we'll want to do.

In Matthew 18, Jesus tells a story about what his kingdom is like.

A king begins to call in all the debts he's owed.

There's one particular bloke who has a debt so astronomically large that he couldn't possibly pay it back.

So, the king says that's he – and his whole family – must be put in prison until the debt's paid.

The fella immediately drops to his knees and asks for mercy.

Even though the debt is huge, debt is cancelled by the king and he's let go.

How would you expect that bloke to respond?

Surely he'd act the same way to others.

Nup. He calls in another servant who owns him a pittance and demands that the money is paid back.

No amount of pleading will get him to change his mind.

That's what Jonah's complaint is like.

He wants to see justice rain down on the Assyrians, but he expects that it shouldn't fall on him.

Some of the other servants see what's happened and dob on him.

The king reverses his decision and the servant gets thrown in jail.

Jesus finishes with a warning:

Matthew 18:35 (NIV)³⁵ "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

Jonah isn't an example to follow, he's a warning to anyone who's experienced God's mercy that we must show mercy to others.

The scandal, the wonder is that God's mercy isn't fair.

As sinners God doesn't give us what we deserve if we come to him.

Everyone who comes to him asking for mercy will find it.

Thank God, that God's mercy isn't fair.

God's Comeback (5-11)

In verses five through to eleven, we see God's response, his comeback.

In typical Jonah style, he doesn't hang around to respond to God's question with words.

Rather than answering, he walks away – he says it best, when he says nothing at all.

Jonah goes and sits outside the city of Nineveh and waits.

He makes a simple little shelter – probably using a few sticks that were at hand – and waits to see what would happen.

I wonder what he thought would happen?

Presumably he's heard about everything the king said.

He knows that God's relented in response to their repentance. What's there to wait for?

It could be a few things.

Perhaps he's hoping that the message has got through to God and that he will respond favourably to his ultimatum, that the Lord will choose him over the Ninevites.

It might be that he's expecting that the Ninevites' repentance won't last and their true colours will come out.

Perhaps God will simply change his mind and he really will dish out a double helping of judgment.

So, he waits.

He doesn't just go and sit anywhere though.

Most of us probably just read over the little detail that he camps to the east of the city.

That's not just because he wants to see the beautiful sun rises over the desert in the morning.

Jonah picks up a lot on the themes of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

And particularly in Genesis, going east describes moving away from God's will.

At the end of Genesis 3, we read:

Genesis 3:24 (NIV)²⁴ After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life.

Jonah was sent East to Nineveh, but now he places himself even further east than that city was – even further from God's will.

Then, there's this curious incident with a plant.

What an unusual way to end the book?

The reason that it's often forgotten is probably because it's so odd.

Everyone hears about the whale and hardly ever about the plant.

Jonah's shelter isn't very good – it doesn't provide very much shade for him.

Just like God appointed a fish to save Jonah from the sea at the beginning of chapter two, now he appoints a plant to save him from the blistering sun.

A small mercy, but mercy nevertheless.

It's a bit like Jack and his beanstalk.

This beautiful plant with big leaves grows up overnight.

The next day, Jonah is very relieved to be delivered from the hot sun.

So, that night, he goes to bed a happy man.

But, the next morning he wakes up and his plant has been destroyed, his shade is gone.

A worm's come and eaten it, causing it to die.

When the sun rises, Jonah cops the full force of the sun and the hot east wind blows in off the desert.

Now Jonah's angry about the loss of the plant as well, verse eight:

Jonah 4:8b (NIV) He wanted to die, and said, "It would be better for me to die than to live."

That's almost exactly the same thing he said in verse three.

And God replies with exactly the same question:

Jonah 4:9a (NIV)⁹ But God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?"

This time, Jonah replies to God: "You bet. I'm livid!"

Jonah 4:9b (NIV) "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

I don't know about you, but that seems like a slight overreaction to me.

But why should he even feel that way?

I get that Jonah's deeply invested in the plant.

Yet he didn't make it grow – he didn't even water it.

I just sprang up overnight.

But for Jonah, the plant was all about what it would do for him.

He loved the shade that it provided, yet he couldn't stop the worm from destroying it.

God's the one who's in control here.

He's the one who caused the plant to grow and he's the one who sent the worm to destroy it again.

And he's using the plant to teach Jonah an object lesson.

There's a parallel between the plant and the people of Nineveh.

The argument God's making is this: if Jonah is concerned by a plant he didn't do anything for, how much more would God himself be concerned about everything he's made.

That's why you get the strange detail about the animals in verse 11.

The God of the Bible is the God who cares for everything he's made.

If God even cares about the animals, how much more the people in Nineveh?

If the city was lost, then a massive amount of life would be lost too.

These are people who God cares about and wants to save.

God rightly wants to have compassion on them.

There were a lot of people in that city – 120,000 who can't tell their left hand from their right.

Some people have understood this as children.

The problem is that the same phrase is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe an 80-year-old taste-tester of the king who could no longer discern whether it was good or not.³

It's an idiom that means people who can't discern.

The Ninevites probably knew they were acting wickedly before Jonah turned up, but they didn't know that Yahweh cared about it.

Yet they didn't have all the advantages of the Israelites.

They didn't have the promises, the prophets and the particulars.

So, God sent a prophet to tell these people he cares for.

God can have compassion on whomever he wants.

He's free to show his mercy on whomever he wants to.

Romans 9 tells us:

Romans 9:15 (NIV)¹⁵ For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

That's not unfair.

What's unfair is that God's mercy cost him.

God's not unjust. He can't leave sin unpunished forever.

He can only forgive wicked people because his son received the punishment that we deserved.

It's unfair that sinful people would allowed to live when our sin deserves death.

But that's what God has done for us.

This unfairness is why God's mercy is so wonderful.

The reason we can have mercy is because of what God has done.

Paul goes on in Romans 9:

Romans 9:16 (NIV)¹⁶ It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy.

None of us deserve it, but all of us need God's mercy.

Jonah was trying to take the moral high ground.

But with God's mercy, there's no room for us to do that.

We all depend on what he has done when we receive his mercy.

He's the only one who can provide it, with no merit coming from us.

For centuries, the people of India have looked down on the Dalit.

People of a particular caste or class who are considered to be 'untouchables' unworthy of mercy.

Most westerners hear about that and we think, "How wrong is that?"

That some people – simply because of their birth – would be unworthy of mercy.

Sounds like Jonah, doesn't it?

And yet I suspect that most, if not all of us are guilty of the same thing with people who we consider "really bad".

The leaders of ISIS. Kim Jong-un.

People who interfere with children or rape women.

Our first response is that at best they should be locked up and have the key thrown away.

These people don't deserve mercy after what they've done.

There's no doubt that wickedness deserves punishment.

Wouldn't it be massively unfair if God showed them mercy?

You bet!

But, people like you and I deserve condemnation for our sin too.

Our sin is just as much of an affront to a holy and righteous God.

God's mercy is equally unfair to us all.

Jesus told another parable in Matthew chapter 20, this time about some workers.⁴

Some workers were hired early in the morning and they're offered the normal wages for a days' work.

Others were hired later in the day.

When it came to knock-off time, the master pays the ones who've only worked a few hours as if they'd worked the whole day.

The blokes who started early expect to be given a massive amount.

So, they're fuming when they get the same amount – a day's wage.

Jesus point out that no one was diddled.

But many of the workers were treated unfairly because they received more than they deserved.

The point of the parable isn't that we earn our way into heaven.

The point of the parable is that God can show his generosity to anyone he chooses.

Who are we – people who need mercy – to demand that he look favourably on us but not others?

That means that if we've truly experienced his unfair mercy, we won't think that we can keep it to ourselves.

The good news about this amazing gift is to be shared.

Not just with our family and friends, although it's easy to stop there.

But also with our neighbours and the people we work with.

Even if we think they don't deserve it.

God's mercy is unfair, which means that he has the right to show compassion to whomever he chooses.

Conclusion

There's a second important character in the story of *Les Misérables*.

Jean Valjean's arch-nemesis is a policeman named Javier.

He's very much like Jonah.

Throughout the book, he struggles and battles with justice and mercy.

In his book, once a criminal, always a criminal.

However, as the play unfolds, we see the good that Valjean does because of the unfair mercy he's seen.

The same is true of God's mercy today, just as it was in Jonah 4.

God's mercy is unfair.

God's mercy is scandalous.

God's mercy is the wonderful, good news that we get the privilege of being a part of.

¹ Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, Chapter XII

² Jonah 1:2

³ 2 Samuel 19:35.

⁴ Matthew 20:1-16

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Discussion Questions

1. Why does Jonah think that he has the right to be angry at God? Do you think we've got the right to be angry at him too?
2. Why didn't Jonah want to go to Nineveh?
3. Why do we often think that we deserve God's mercy while others don't?
4. How does the unfairness of God's mercy place us all on the same level?
5. What does God's concern for the cattle tell us about him?
6. How would you respond to a Christian friend who struggles with the gospel because it's unfair?
7. How can a parent show mercy and yet still teach right and wrong?