

WHEN MERCY FEELS UNFAIR

When Mercy Feels Unfair

Key idea:

God's mercy often challenges our sense of fairness, but it also enables us to align our hearts to his.

Key text:

Jonah 3-4

3:1 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.” 3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very important city — a visit required three days. 4 On the first day, Jonah started into the city. He proclaimed: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overturned.” 5 The Ninevites believed God. They declared a fast, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. 6 When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. 7 Then he issued a proclamation in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let any man or beast, herd or flock, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink. 8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth. Let everyone call urgently on God. Let them give up their evil ways and their violence. 9 Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish.” 10 When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

4:1 But Jonah was greatly displeased and became angry. 2 He prayed to the LORD, “O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee 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. 3 Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.” 4 But the LORD replied, “Have you any right to be angry?” 5 Jonah went out and sat down at a place east of the city. There he made himself a shelter, sat in its shade and waited to see what would happen to the city. 6 Then the LORD God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. 7 But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. 8 When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah’s head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, “It would be better for me to die than to live.” 9 But God said to Jonah, “Do you have a right to be

angry about the vine?" "I do," he said. "I am angry enough to die." 10 But the LORD said, "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. 11 But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?"

Key points:

1. God's mercy often challenges our human sense of fairness.
2. We are eager to receive God's mercy for ourselves but can be hesitant to see it extended to others.
3. God's kingdom and righteous rule is the priority, even when it doesn't align with our expectations.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does our culture's emphasis on "fairness" sometimes conflict with the concept of God's grace and mercy?
2. Dave mentioned that the gospel is spreading rapidly in the Muslim world and China. How can we cultivate a heart that rejoices when people we may view as "enemies" come to faith?
3. Reflect on the statement: "If we reject God's mercy toward others, we begrudge God's generosity and grace toward us." How does this challenge you personally?
4. How does the story of Jonah illuminate the tension between God's justice and His mercy, and what implications does this have for our understanding of salvation?
5. What does the analogy of Jonah's plant reveal about our own priorities and how they might conflict with God's concern for all people?
6. What can we learn from the Ninevites' response to Jonah's warning, and how might it apply to our own lives when confronted with our sinfulness?

Practical Applications:

1. This week, identify someone you struggle to show mercy towards. Pray daily for God to soften your heart and help you see them through His eyes.
2. Practice using the phrase "Such were some of us" (1 Corinthians 6:11) when you're tempted to judge others harshly. How might this change your perspective?
3. As a group, brainstorm ways you can actively celebrate and support new believers, especially those from backgrounds very different from your own.
4. Memorize Lamentations 3:22-23: "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."