

CHRISTIAN EXPECTATION OF GRACE

Alicia folded her arms. The pastor was talking about Sister Shantel and Elder Davis. He was gushing over the two, but especially Shantel, like the woman could do no wrong. She got her GED in prison and was about to graduate with a bachelor's in social work. She wanted to help young people and to keep them from making bad choices.

Elder Davis, whom Alicia once liked, started dating Shantel more than a year ago. And now, they were engaged. Really? Shantel was a convicted felon! Why was she the one to get married first?

Alicia was even suspicious of this “jailhouse conversion.” Sure, Shantel had been at the church for more than six years. She was active in the prison ministry. She had the kind of personality that drew a lot of attention and made everyone want to talk with her.

Meanwhile, Alicia was still single, but at least she hadn't been in trouble with the law. *Lord, it just doesn't seem fair*, she thought. She rubbed her temples and could feel a headache coming. Alicia knew her jealousy was not founded in her Christian principles, but it got to her anyways. Maybe it really is as a friend had told her, “The Lord shows grace and mercy to whom He will.”

1 Why is it sometimes so hard to show grace to those whom we consider to be unworthy of such a courtesy?

2 Why do people sometimes feel entitled to withhold mercy from others?

3 How does our God prove to be just and forgiving?

¹ And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, ² Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee.

³ So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey. ⁴ And Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown. ⁵ So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them.

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 large city; it took three days to go through it. ⁴ Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” ⁵ The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

God Sends Jonah (Again); Nineveh Repents

Even though Jonah ran away from God's command—God sent the great fish to swallow him and bring him back—Jonah has a second opportunity to heed the call. It could be that Jonah is still sitting on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea, freshly out of the great fish (*gross*). Or maybe he first returned to Jerusalem to offer sacrifice, as he promised from the belly of the creature (Jonah 2:9). The text doesn't say. Whatever the case, God comes to Jonah and repeats the command to preach in Nineveh. In essence, God is giving Jonah a “do-over.” His patience and mercy are on display for Jonah, who had disregarded the message the first time. God has not given up on Jonah, and God has not given up on the residents of Nineveh, despite their sin and heinous treatment of subjected people.

When God commands, “Go to the great city of Nineveh,” He does not mention the city's wickedness again (Jonah 3:2; compare 1:2). That was the part that Jonah could wholeheartedly agree upon! God simply instructs Jonah to “go” and to “proclaim” whatever message that God will supply, at the appropriate time. Sufficiently humbled and compliant after three days inside the fish, Jonah gets up and

travels to Nineveh. To be clear though, this journey would take weeks on foot, depending on where he begins. Jonah is now willing to heed God's direction.

Nineveh was not yet the capital of an Assyrian Empire, but it is called simply “a very large city” (Jonah 3:3). It is so large that its metropolitan area takes “three days” for Jonah to traverse. After arriving, Jonah journeys to the heart of the city, proclaiming the message that God has given him: “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown” (v. 4). In a modern context, this sounds strange. We are not in the habit of closely listening to the words of traveling prophets, those proclaiming a message of judgment on the street corner.

Assyria and Israel were military enemies. The residents and leaders of Nineveh face the curious sight of a lone, courageous prophet in their midst—one whose reputation for accuracy might have preceded him (see 2 Kings 14:25). And they listen to the message.

Before Jonah makes it through the entire city, his message has its intended effect. As a result of Jonah's faithful, but reluctant, preaching, “the Ninevites believed God,” signaling their profound repentance with fasting and other signs of mourning, “from the greatest to the least” (Jonah 3:5). From the king on down, the people repent and ask God's mercy (see vv. 6–9). When God sees their repentance, He responds in the way that God *always* responds to a repentant heart: He shows mercy (v. 10).

1 Where do you see multiple ways that God is showing grace in this text and context?

2 Why would Jonah have been reluctant to go to Nineveh?

3 How can we know when repentance is genuine?

⁶ And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. ⁷ But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. ⁸ And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live.

⁹ And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death.

¹⁰ Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: ¹¹ And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?

⁶ Then the LORD God provided a leafy plant and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the plant. ⁷ But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the plant 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, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" "It is," he said. "And I'm so angry I wish I were dead."

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ And should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left—and also many animals?"

Jonah Complains; God Explains

Although Jonah had been successful in his mission, he is far from happy about it. In fact, he is *angry*. He goes on to complain that he knew all along that God would be compassionate, and this was exactly why he had tried fleeing in the first place. Jonah knows God to be "gracious and compassionate . . . slow to anger and abounding in love" (Jonah 4:2; compare Ex. 34:6). Jonah's level of frustration is so great that he voices a desire to die (v. 3). Instead of just heading back

home, Jonah makes a shelter for himself “waited to see what would happen in the city” (v. 5). Perhaps Nineveh would relapse, and God would bring destruction after all. Jonah could only hope.

If you are familiar with the story of Jonah, this reading picks up where many retellings leave off. God isn’t done with Jonah, and the Lord arranges an object lesson. He provides “a leafy plant” as shade to minimize discomfort (v. 6). It is a world without sunscreen, after all. And Jonah is “very happy” (v. 6). But the comfort is short-lived.

Next, God destroys the plant by sending a worm to ruin the shade (v. 7). As the plant withers, God sends ‘a scorching east wind’ to take its place, and the sun beats down on Jonah to the point that “he [grows] faint” (v. 8). With Jonah’s small comfort gone, he pleads again to die.

God shows up to question Jonah and to explain this curious object lesson. Jonah is angry about the plant; he liked it and did not want to see it wither. But God is really asking, *What is the appropriate level of concern for others?* Jonah found himself worked up and remorseful about a plant, but he first encountered it a day earlier! It was God who supplied the growth and created it in the first place. The point really isn’t about a plant, obviously, just like Jonah’s misplaced anger wasn’t just about the loss of shade. God reminds him that “more than a hundred and twenty thousand people . . . and also many animals” reside in Nineveh (v. 11)

Jonah’s response is not recorded. This is the very end of the book. But the message is about God’s mercy and concern for all people. God created them, cares for them, and offers grace and mercy in abundance.

1 If you were to add a speaking line at the end, what do you think Jonah would say?

2 When have you noticed one person transferring strong emotions to another?

3 What do you make of the implication that God cares about the wellbeing of animals?

Reflecting God’s Mercy

Through the illustration of a plant and its shade—not to mention by bringing Nineveh to repentance in the previous chapter—God showed Jonah that He is merciful and compassionate toward all people. Jonah needed to display that same mercy, but he preferred retributive justice. God calls Christians today to respond to the grace received through Jesus by showing compassion and mercy to others—even for those who are difficult to love.

Jonah’s example should help us to consider the importance of extending God’s grace to anyone we consider undeserving. God knows their hearts, and ours. While it is better to be at peace with those around us, it is not always possible for us to see justice served or our enemies come to ruin. And this text would suggest it shouldn’t please us when we do.

God calls us to extend the same mercy to others as He has shown toward us. God will bless our efforts, whether those blessings are immediate or not. We are to be merciful because God is merciful (Luke 6:36). God knows our hearts, and He has offered forgiveness before we come to all the right conclusions. Therefore, as those who have been forgiven, we are to forgive in return (Luke 7:47).

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matt. 5:7). His brother James is even more blunt: “Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. . . . Mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:12–13). As we obey, God will give us peace in our hearts, and God will judge properly. Whatever anger, grudges, or violations that we cannot surrender—we are only harming ourselves.

1 How should an awareness of God’s mercy to us help us be merciful to others?

2 What does God’s Word reassure us will happen when we are merciful?

3 Where do you lack mercy? How would you ask God to address it?

Grace Available to All

Followers of Jesus are grateful for the gift of grace extended to us, while we were yet sinners. Sometimes it can be hard to want others, especially those who have irritated or wronged us, to have access to that same grace.

Find a nice day to take a walk around your neighborhood, office complex, or school campus. As you pass people's doors, pray that those people would hear and receive the gospel of grace. As the Spirit leads, pray that your heart would be as merciful as God's.

Key Text

Then said the Lord, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh? —Jonah 4:10–11a KJV

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?” —Jonah 4:10–11a NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of May 4 through May 9

- Mon.** Genesis 2:4–10, 15—God Ordains Productive Work.
- Tue.** Proverbs 16:1–3, 8–9—Commit Your Work to the Lord.
- Wed.** Psalm 8—Caring for the Work of God's Hands.
- Thu.** Exodus 31:12–17—The Sabbath Is a Perpetual Covenant.
- Fri.** John 5:8–11, 16–17—Working on the Sabbath.
- Sat.** Acts 20:31–35—Supporting Oneself and Others.

Next Week: Gen. 2:15; Ex. 20:9; John 5:17; 9:4; Acts 20:33–35; 2 Thess. 3:6–12
We will discuss God's intention for our working lives. How would you rate your attitude at work or when you serve others?