Jonah 4 — When We Resist Mercy

Teaching Outline — A Study of Jonah 4
Passage: Jonah 4 | **Suggested teaching time:** 45 minutes

Lesson objective

- Class will be able to:
  - **Explain** how Jonah 4 exposes outward obedience without inward compassion
  - **Rejoice** in God's merciful and righteous character
  - **Identify** one practical way to value people above personal comfort

---

Introduction (5 min)

- **Open to Jonah 4**
- Chapter 3 ended in a way that should make a preacher rejoice
  - Nineveh heard the warning
  - Humbled itself
  - Turned from violence
  - Spared the announced disaster
  - God used Jonah's preaching in a remarkable work of repentance
- What we'd expect in ch. 4
  - Jonah praising God
  - Discipling new believers
  - Returning home thankful
- What we get instead
  - "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry" (4:1)
  - Mercy brought relief to a city — and anger to the prophet
  - That contrast = the burden of the chapter
  - Possible to:
    - Say the right words
    - Carry out the assigned task
    - Even be used by God

        - …while our desires remain far from His heart
- Jonah had already learned much
    - Fled from God
    - Endured the storm
    - Preserved in the fish
    - Prayed from the depths
    - Obeyed the renewed command
    - Yet spiritual experiences ≠ automatic spiritual maturity
    - Can know the story of grace and resist it when it reaches someone we dislike
    - We come not merely to criticize Jonah, but to let God's question search us
- **Main truth:** God wants not only our outward obedience, but [BLANK: hearts] that rejoice in His mercy
    - Outward obedience matters
        - God commanded; Jonah had no right to flee
    - But God isn't satisfied with a servant who does His work while resenting His purposes
    - He wants a heart that:
        - Loves what He loves
        - Grieves over what grieves Him
- Ask the Lord: Is there anyone I'd rather see judged than forgiven, restored, or helped?
    - An enemy
    - A political opponent
    - An offender
    - Someone who hurt you
    - Someone whose sin seems especially offensive
    - God doesn't ask us to call sin good (Jonah 4 makes that clear)
    - He does ask us to:
        - Agree with His holy concern for sinners
        - Receive correction when comfort matters more than people

---

Background (4 min)

- Where Jonah stands in the story
    - Prophet from Israel, sent to Nineveh, prominent Assyrian city
    - Assyria feared for cruelty and violence

    - Didn’t run because Nineveh was easy
        - Ran from a hard command involving a people Israel feared
- Setting explains Jonah’s emotions — doesn’t excuse them
    - Nineveh’s wickedness was real
        - God sent Jonah because it had come before Him
    - Warning of judgment wasn’t pretend
    - God is holy; nations accountable for:
        - Violence
        - Idolatry
        - Pride
        - Injustice
    - Mercy never means God overlooks evil
- God had shown compassion to **Jonah**
    - Fled → God pursued
    - Storm threatened sailors → God revealed Himself
    - Into the sea → God appointed a fish
    - Prayed → God heard
    - Obeyed after failure → God recommissioned
    - Jonah knew by experience he lived by mercy
    - Ch. 4 issue: Will he rejoice when the same mercy reaches others?
- What happened in 3:10
    - God saw “that they turned from their evil way”
    - Didn’t do the calamity He’d said
    - Warning achieved its purpose: exposed sin, called people to turn
    - God didn’t change from holy to merciful
        - Acted consistently with His character by responding to repentance
- Guards against two opposite mistakes
    1. “God should never judge sin”
    2. “God should show no mercy to sinners we consider especially bad”
        - Scripture rejects both
        - God of Jonah: righteous in judgment, rich in mercy
        - Later Assyria returned to evil → Nineveh judged (as Nahum foretold)
        - In Jonah’s day: warning + reprieve to a humbled city
        - Patience ≠ approval of sin; judgment ≠ denial of compassion

- Jonah's real objection
  - Not that God became unjust
  - Jonah resisted God's [BLANK: compassionate] dealing toward Nineveh — compassion toward people Jonah didn't want to receive it
  - Conflict: Jonah's narrow desires vs. God's broad concern for a city of image-bearers
- Why this chapter is useful for the church
  - Refuses easy categories
    - Not an unbelieving pagan
    - Not a flawless servant
  - Received revelation, correction, rescue, renewed opportunity
  - Still needs God to confront a heart that hasn't caught up with his lips
  - Approach with humility
    - Not only "How could Jonah think this way?"
    - "Where am I saying true things about God while resisting their implications for my relationships, prayers, priorities?"

Exposition: Jonah's Angry Prayer (6 min)

- **Read Jonah 4:1–4 aloud**

v. 1 — Jonah's anger

- "But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry"
- Strong wording
  - What God saw as a merciful response to repentance, Jonah judged a great evil
- Jonah's emotions aren't hidden from God — and shouldn't be from us
- Scripture doesn't polish its servants into unreal heroes
  - Tells the truth about failures so we:
    - Fear our own pride
    - Admire God's patience

v. 2 — Jonah's prayer

- "…was not this my saying… Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness…"
- Jonah knew God was a [BLANK: gracious] God, yet resented His grace

- The tragedy: Jonah's theology is accurate
  - **Gracious** — gives favor people don't deserve
  - **Merciful** — withholds deserved judgment; compassion to the needy
  - **Slow to anger** — patience is real, not reluctant
  - **Great kindness** — abundant covenant love
  - Knows these truths; resents their application to Nineveh
- Explains why he fled to Tarshish (ch. 1)
  - Not fear of public speaking, hardship, or travel
  - Anticipated warning → repentance → spared city
  - Wanted judgment without the possibility of mercy for *them*
    - God's righteousness applied to their evil
    - But not God's mercy applied to their repentance
- Be careful — we can use true doctrine to defend a sinful attitude
  - Speak eloquently about grace, yet be irritated when grace interrupts consequences we wanted someone to receive
  - Defend God's holiness while secretly enjoying an enemy's downfall
  - Correct words ≠ proof our hearts align with God

v. 3 — Jonah's despair

- "…take… my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live"
- A serious statement
  - Never treat a desire to die as a joke or mere drama
  - Pastorally, such words call for:
    - Compassionate attention
    - Safety
    - Prayer
    - Wise help
- Jonah: overwhelmed, angry, self-focused
- Yet God doesn't abandon His servant

v. 4 — God's first searching question

- "Doest thou well to be angry?"
- God doesn't start with a shaming speech — He asks a question

- Meaning: Is your anger right?
  - God's question exposed whether Jonah's [BLANK: anger] was right
  - Does it fit:
    - My character?
    - My mercy?
    - The situation?
- God's questions aren't requests for information
  - They expose what's already in the heart

The question reaches us

- When angry, we start with the feeling
  - "I feel wronged… I'm offended… I can't believe this happened"
- God asks deeper: **Is this anger righteous?**
  - Directed against genuine evil?
  - Governed by truth?
  - Free from selfish revenge?
  - Or am I angry because God hasn't arranged the world around my preferences?

Jonah's silence

- Doesn't answer; leaves the city
- Silence ≠ accepting correction
  - Next scene shows resentment remains
- Still, God keeps teaching him
  - That patience is part of the lesson
  - Lord corrects His children not to crush them
    - To bring them into truthful fellowship with Him

Exposition: The Booth, Gourd, Worm, and Wind (6 min)

- **Read Jonah 4:5–9 aloud**

v. 5 — The booth

- Jonah goes out, sits east of the city, makes a booth, sits in its shadow
  - "till he might see what would become of the city"
- God already spared Nineveh — Jonah apparently still hopes for destruction
- Rather than entering with compassion, he positions himself outside to watch

v. 6 — The gourd

- Booth gives only limited shade
- "And the LORD God prepared a gourd… to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd."
- The word "**prepared**" is key
  - Earlier: appointed a great fish
  - Here: a plant
  - Next: a worm and a wind
  - The word "[BLANK: prepared]" shows God's sovereign direction of the scene
  - God who directs the sea directs small details on a hot hillside
  - Nothing here is accidental
- The gourd
  - Likely a fast-growing shade plant
  - Scripture doesn't require the exact species
  - God gives gracious, temporary relief from heat
- Jonah is "exceeding glad"
  - Joy over a little shade vs. anger over a spared city
  - The plant exposes the **scale of Jonah's affections**

vv. 7–8 — The worm and the wind

- "God prepared a worm… and it smote the gourd that it withered"
  - Relief disappears quickly
- "God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished… to die"
- God isn't playing with Jonah
  - Teaching through an object lesson that reaches beyond argument

The plant wasn’t Jonah’s

- He did not:
  - Create it
  - Make it grow
  - Sustain it
  - Deserve it
- Grieved its loss because it served his comfort
- God lets him feel the loss to see his distorted priorities
- A comfort can be good — and still spiritually dangerous when:
  - Treated as a right
  - Loved more than people

v. 9 — God’s second question

- “Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd?”
- “I do well to be angry, even unto death”
- Astonishing — still defends the very attitude God questioned
- Privilege doesn’t eliminate the need for ongoing repentance
  - Witnessed God’s power and mercy
  - Still needed to submit emotions and values to God

The warning for us

- We get angry when:
  - A schedule changes
  - A possession fails
  - A convenience disappears
  - A preference is ignored
- Small frustrations can reveal what rules our hearts
- Jonah showed [BLANK: pity] for a temporary plant
  - We may show intense pity for a lost comfort
  - While little concern for:
    - A hurting neighbor
    - An unreached people
    - A person far from God

- Issue isn't enjoying God's gifts — it's whether we:
  - Love the Giver
  - Receive gifts thankfully
  - Hold them loosely for His purposes

Exposition: God's Final Question (4 min)

- **Read Jonah 4:10–11 aloud** — the book's final words
  - "Thou hast had pity on the gourd… should not I spare Nineveh, that great city… sixscore thousand persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

The contrast God draws

- Jonah pitied a plant
  - Didn't labor for it or make it grow
  - Existed briefly
  - Gave personal relief
- Nineveh: a great city filled with [BLANK: people] made by God
  - Not objects in Jonah's national story
  - Not obstacles to his comfort
  - Human beings:
    - Made by God
    - Morally accountable to God
    - Desperately in need of mercy

"Cannot discern between their right hand and their left"

- Understood more than one way
  - Young children
  - Or widespread moral/spiritual ignorance
- Either way: God calls Jonah to see the immense human need his anger ignored
- "Also much cattle"
  - God's concern for the whole city affected by judgment
  - Doesn't erase people/animal distinction
  - Displays the breadth of God's care as Creator

Not an argument against judgment

- Nineveh was warned precisely because sin deserves judgment
- It's an argument against Jonah's **coldness**
  - If Jonah cares so much about a temporary plant that served him…
  - …shouldn't the Creator care about a city He made and sustains?
  - Obvious answer: **yes**

The unanswered ending

- Book doesn't record Jonah's answer — deliberately
- We're left under the question with Jonah
  - Do we understand why God delights in [BLANK: mercy]?
    - God calls us to rejoice in His mercy toward sinners
  - Do we value temporary comforts more than people?
  - Do we let these shrink our concern for those God calls us to love?
    - Fear
    - Injury
    - Nationalism
    - Bitterness
    - Personal preference
- Unresolved ending invites each reader to respond

Application (5 min)

1. **Where is your obedience outward but not inward?**
   - You may:
     - Serve in church
     - Care for family
     - Fulfill work duties
     - Speak carefully about doctrine
   - Good things — but done with resentment?
   - Obeying God while withholding your heart from people He's placed before you?
   - God sees both the task and the motive

2. **Identify a possible gourd**
    - Not necessarily sinful — may be a legitimate comfort:
        - Privacy
        - Health
        - Predictable schedule
        - Preferred ministry role
        - Money
        - Political influence
        - Reputation
        - A possession
    - Trouble begins when:
        - We believe our peace depends on it
        - We respond with disproportionate anger when God removes it
    - Ask: What loss makes me angrier than another's spiritual need makes me concerned?
3. **A person or group you've become hard toward**
    - Don't have to deny their wrong
        - Jonah 4 doesn't deny Nineveh's violence
    - You can:
        - Desire justice
        - Set wise boundaries
        - Still pray for repentance
    - A Christian must not:
        - Delight in evil
        - Seek personal vengeance
    - Entrust judgment to God while asking Him to save sinners — even those who sinned against us
    - **One specific act of obedience this week**
    - Pray by name for a difficult person
    - Write a gracious message (where reconciliation is appropriate and safe)
    - Give toward gospel work among a people you seldom consider
    - Refuse to repeat a bitter story
    - Ask another believer to help you see a blind spot
    - These don't earn God's favor
        - Responses to the [BLANK: mercy] we've already received

4. **Receive God's questions as kindness**
    - When His Word exposes anger, self-pity, or indifference
        - Don't defend them like Jonah
        - Confess them
        - Ask God to change your desires
    - Goal isn't manufactured affection
    - Goal: a heart shaped by God's truth that
        - Grieves over sin
        - Rejoices when sinners turn to Him

Christ and the Gospel (3 min)

- Jonah's failure makes us look for a better Servant → **Jesus Christ**
    - Jonah went reluctantly to a city he didn't want spared
        - Jesus came willingly into a world of sinners
    - Jonah sat outside Nineveh waiting for destruction
        - Jesus "beheld the city, and wept over it" (Luke 19:41)
        - Didn't minimize Jerusalem's sin, but grieved over those rejecting Him
- Judgment and mercy
    - Jonah wanted others judged while he lived by mercy
    - Jesus, sinless, deserved no judgment
        - Yet willingly bore the penalty sinners deserve
    - "…while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8)
    - At the cross, God's justice against sin and love for sinners meet perfectly
- What the gospel is
    - **Not:** God ignores evil because He is kind
    - **Is:** Christ died for our sins and rose again
        - Everyone who repents and trusts Him is forgiven and made new
    - Can't save ourselves by:
        - Religious effort
        - Moral improvement
        - Outward obedience
    - We need God's grace
    - Mercy Jonah resented for Nineveh = mercy every one of us needs

- If you haven’t trusted Christ
  - Don’t hope in being better than Nineveh, Jonah, or anyone
  - Admit your sin before God
  - Believe Jesus died and rose
  - Turn to Him in faith; ask Him to forgive and save you
  - He receives those who come
- If you’re a believer
  - Gospel also corrects your attitude toward others
  - Not rescued for being more deserving than the person you struggle to love
    - Rescued because God is merciful
  - The gospel makes us more like [BLANK: Christ]
    - Loved His enemies
    - Obeyed the Father perfectly
    - Gave Himself to bring sinners to God

Discussion (5 min)

- Let the [BLANK: Scripture] govern the conversation
- Aim for honest [BLANK: repentance] rather than merely criticizing Jonah
- Move from understanding to honest response

Discussion questions

1. What does Jonah 4:2 reveal about Jonah’s motive for fleeing from God’s command?
2. Why did God use the gourd, worm, and wind instead of only giving Jonah a lecture?
3. What does God’s final question teach about the value of people in a city like Nineveh?
4. What personal comfort can become a gourd in our lives?
5. How does Christ’s response to sinners correct Jonah’s response and ours?

Guiding the discussion

- Keep focus on the text
  - Don’t speculate beyond what Jonah says
- Let the group see both:
  - God’s righteousness toward sin

    - His compassion toward sinners
- If someone names bitterness or resistance
    - Receive it carefully
    - Don’t turn it into a public confession exercise
- Purpose: repentance, faith, practical love

Closing (2 min)

- God’s question leaves us a choice
    - Will we:
        - Defend our anger?
        - Cling to temporary comforts?
        - Measure people by our preferences?
    - Or submit to the God who is gracious, merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness?
- **Restate main truth:** God wants not only our outward obedience, but hearts that rejoice in His mercy
- This week: [BLANK: pray] for one difficult person
    - Ask God to replace resentment with desire for their good
    - Above all, for their salvation

> **Closing prayer:** “Merciful Father, thank You for the mercy You have shown us in Christ. Forgive us for loving comfort more than people and for resenting grace toward those we find difficult. Give us hearts that agree with Your holiness and rejoice in Your mercy. Help us obey You gladly and point others to Jesus Christ. Amen.”