

Jonah had gone 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 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 4:5-11 NIV2011)

God Decides What's Fair

"Life's not fair." If you are like me, something or someone taught you that at a young age. And since then you have found more people and more things teaching you this truth again and again. And it does not matter how times this happens—we still don't like it. We have little patience and are quick to call out when the referee for the game seems to be one-sided. We don't like it when someone does less work and gets the same pay. We are ready to throw our arms up in disgust and disbelief when someone doesn't get into trouble when they've done something obviously wrong. It really gets our blood boiling when justice is not being served.

That's Jonah's issue. He's all sorts of upset because, for him, things didn't look fair. It wasn't fair that God had called him to go to Nineveh in the first place. They were not God's people. In fact, they were not even good people. They were the enemies attacking Jonah's homeland a number of times. As far as he, Jonah, is concerned, they were not worthy of God's love. That's why he had gotten on a boat and went in the opposite direction in the first place. He knew God is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love; a God who relents (Jonah 4:2). And for Jonah, that simply would not be fair!

But here he is sometime later after spending 3 days in the belly of a great fish and 3 days preaching throughout the city. And what happens? God's Word works. God's message through Jonah turns the heart of the people of Nineveh. From the king down to the animals there is mass repentance, turning from wickedness to the Lord. The Lord sees this all and has compassion on them. He does not bring the destruction that he had threatened. Jonah should have been ecstatic! But Jonah couldn't have been less. He hates it because it's not fair.

So Jonah goes out of the city, makes himself a little place with some shade, sits down, and pouts. It's not fair! He wants to see the city burn! Maybe God will change his mind. Maybe he's sure they will go back to their wicked ways. So why doesn't he just destroy them now?—Jonah might wonder. For now, Jonah would rather die than live and see them not get what he thinks they deserve. Because it's not fair.

To a certain point, I understand Jonah's frustration. It can be hard waiting for Judgment Day when all of God's enemies will stand and give account for how they treat his people. But what might be even more difficult to hear is that God's desire is for them to be saved too and to turn from their wicked ways. And he sends us out to do share this Good News. That doesn't seem fair. You see how people are acting anything but God-pleasing with how they treat the church, God's Word, destruction of people's lives and property. How much more quickly do we see that and think, "They'll get what's coming to them." Rather than, "They really need to know God's forgiveness and love."

We know that every sin is equal in God's sight. We know God's mercy is equal for all people. But do you really feel the same way for the rapist and child molester? The man who murders his wife and kids in cold blood? Those living in sexual sin? The person who had or performs an abortion? The person who has hurt your loved one? The person who has betrayed your love and taken advantage of you? The one who has taken their anger out on you? Does it sound very fair?

Maybe you struggle with how the love right now is fair for later down the road. You see or hear about that baby who is baptized whose parents rarely come to church. You wouldn't say it's not worth it, but, at the same time...Or you hear someone has turned from the sins. They repent! Great, glorious, rejoice! But you might find yourself wondering, "For how long?" Is it fair to forgive them now if they might go back to it again? Someone is away from the church for some time comes back. And we are supposed to just welcome them back? It's hard to shake that feeling because humanly speaking it's not fair.

But, what is fair? More often than not what we really mean by fair is whatever is more favorable to me. As long as it fits into my world view and belief system. As long as it's in line with the cause that I'm fighting for and political agenda. As long as I come out ahead—even if it's a little bit. As long as my personal comfort isn't being taken away. As long as I get recognized for my good work. As long as my suffering isn't ignored. We don't want much or even much more, just for things to be fair.

But how is that going to work? Because if everyone is deciding and choosing what fair should look like, it will inevitably happen where it becomes unfair for someone. Again, life isn't fair. So we look for an objective party that decides what is and is not fair. And, lo and behold, we have one. God, because he is the creator of the world, gets to decide what is fair and to uphold fairness.

But the thing is, you don't want God to be fair. If God were fair, he would have struck Jonah down on the spot when he says he would rather die than continue to live. If God were fair he would have told you after you fall back into that same sin again, "You've done it too much. You've reached the end of my patience and love." Being fair means treating you as your sins deserve, especially the so-called little ones that we try to ignore and pretend to not be as bad. How dare we think we can decide what is more or less offensive in the eyes of the perfect God.

But it's not just that you do bad things. It's what you are. What Jonah fails to recognize is something we still struggle with seeing. It's not just "them." We too were not good people. We too were God's enemies. What would be fair then is a life of misery on this earth only to be followed up with eternal misery in hell that never stops. That's fair.

But instead God chooses to not be fair. He doesn't treat you as your sins deserve. Instead of striking down his pouting prophet he grows a plant to give Jonah relief from the hot sun and to teach him. The next day God sends a worm that chews on the plant, it withers, and dies. Now Jonah sits under the blazing sun and a scorching wind saps all of his energy. Again Jonah thinks it would be better for him to die than live! He's so mad because his wonderful plant that gave him so much joy and comfort had died on him so he too wants to die. And that's the last we hear from Jonah because God speaks and it's time for him and us to listen: "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" Jonah sure thinks it is. And God continues: **"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?"**

The Lord is saying to Jonah, "You had so much concern and personal investment in a plant that you did nothing to grow or keep alive. For a plant you are acting this way. If that's how you feel about a plant that's here one night and dead the next, shouldn't I feel that way and more for a city that has 120,000 children in it, many animals, and everyone else who can distinguish their right hand from the left?"

Well, shouldn't he? Of course he should! Because he did create them. He knit them together in their mother's wombs. He fearfully and wonderfully made each one. He is the one who opens his hands to give them their food at the proper time. He knows the number of hairs on their heads. He does not want to see his own chewed up by the worm of sin and die. He wants his creation, his people, to live!

That's what he sees when he looks at the city of Nineveh, his pouting prophet Jonah, when he looks at you. He knows what you deserve. It's not some great hidden secret. He is the standard keeper after all. He knows what is fair. But he doesn't want to treat you as your sins deserve. Instead, he wants to give you his mercy. But those sins cannot be swept under the rug, forgotten and ignored. No, they still need to be paid

for. The debt would still be there. The offense needs to be taken away. So God does something that is completely unfair: he punishes Jesus in your place. The sinless suffers for the sinful. The perfect dies for the imperfect. He who is the life gives up his own to give you life with him.

And, yet, while Jesus hangs from that cross he does not cry out, “Unfair!” Instead he says, “Forgive them for they know not what they are doing.” Instead of pointing to what you do deserve, he promises life and paradise with him. He knows why his Father has left him and God had forsaken him. Because God is just and he had dumped the cesspool of all sin on his own Son—as unfair as it might be—He must suffer alone. Because that’s what sin deserves. God is so repulsed at the stench of that sin that he leaves his Son to suffer the ultimate punishment: God’s presence completely removed.

But because God punishes Jesus, he will not punish you. Because he’s already declared you not guilty of sin on the cross, no accusation holds up against you in his courtroom. That’s justice. And because God is just, he gets to decide what is fair. In patient mercy he does not treat you as your sins deserve. In everlasting grace he gives you love that you do not deserve. And then grace upon grace, he works to make this your own. He works through his miraculous Word to turn your undeserving heart into a believing one that receives his grace and forgiveness. God makes you his child in baptism and promises that no time in the future will he treat you as your sins deserve. He promises that until your last breath on this earth it’s never too late to ask for his forgiveness. He’s more than happy to do it. Jesus already paid for it all. In faith it’s yours. No, it’s not fair that we should have this love. But God gives you the fruit of the vine with Jesus’ body and blood in the Lord’s Supper to forgive your sins and to assure you that you are shielded from God’s burning wrath. No, it’s not fair in the eyes of the world or even our own reason. But God doesn’t ask you for your opinion. God decides what is fair and declares that in Jesus’ name your sins are forgiven and he spares you from destruction in hell.

And now, as his forgiven child, he sends you out to share this forgiving love. He still has compassion for the not so “good” people in the world. His heart goes out to those who are still not part of his kingdom. His love goes to all people whether the world feels they deserve it or not. Because God decides what is fair. And thanks be to God that his patient mercy and everlasting grace are not fair and they are yours. Amen.