



ACT JUSTLY
LOVE MERCY



A True Justice Documentary Study for Faith Communities



The 2023 Scoper Lecture
in Christian Thought

SETTING THE STAGE

"True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality" tells the story of how Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) grew his career—and passion—for defending condemned prisoners on Alabama's death row. In this study, we explore Mr. Stevenson's story, a few of his clients' journeys, and his ultimate message of love through justice. This study is designed for five gatherings and is created to be a starting point for rich group conversation in anticipation of Mr. Stevenson's visit to University of Virginia (UVA) on March 28, 2023. After watching the documentary, we recommend that your group spend a minimum of two hours in conversation, to delve into this story and its implications for your own community and your own lives.

Mr. Stevenson's visit comes at an important time in the life of the UVA and Charlottesville. To the dismay of many, Charlottesville is known for its racially charged national news moments. Most notably, the Unite the Right rally from August 11-12, 2017, which gathered White supremacists from across the country to oppose the removal of the statue of General Robert E. Lee from Charlottesville's former Lee Park. This moment espoused hate against Black communities and Jewish people in Charlottesville and beyond, as this group terrorized both Charlottesville and the University, marching on the Downtown Mall and the Lawn. More recently, an unknown person placed a noose—a symbol of violence against Black people harkening back to the lynching era—on the Homer statue at the end of the Lawn on September 7, 2022. Charlottesville and the UVA community have been forced to question its toleration of, response to, and efforts to eradicate the attitudes that led to these painful events.

One of Mr. Stevenson's great efforts is to highlight how acts of remembering and of honest conversation about our nation's history of racial inequality can mend bigotry and its residual effects. Charlottesville has begun this work. In 2019, as part of the community's multi-year engagement with EJI's Community Remembrance Project, community members and officials unveiled a historical marker recognizing lynching in

front of the Albemarle County Courthouse. Further, dozens of residents gathered soil from local lynching sites into jars and travelled to EJI's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama to place the jars among other lynching sites' soil. But still, there is more work to do.

As you watch "True Justice" and discuss it with others, take the time and space to welcome your feelings of awe and anguish. This is a difficult story with numerous moments of injustice. But there is also ample hope to grasp onto as Stevenson's work grows. You are entering into complex topics. Recognize that each of you brings a unique perspective and experience; whenever your discussions become painful, remain committed to kindness and respect for one another.

Overview: Gather a group of any size and watch—either together or separately—"True Justice: Bryan Stevenson's Fight for Equality." This discussion guide provides a conversational jumpstart by identifying themes with accompanying questions. With this in mind, consider the following discussion prompts, and choose the categories and questions that pique your curiosity or spark conversation. There is no need to answer every question.

Opening Questions: Take some time to introduce yourself to each other and say where you are from, whether you were familiar with Bryan Stevenson or EJI before this study, and why you decided to participate in a group discussion on the documentary.

[The Legacy of Racial Bias in the United States](#)

Overview: The documentary tracks the historic events that led to modern systemic racism, and Stevenson breaks these moments into four groups: slavery, the lynching era, segregation, and mass incarceration. Stevenson further argues that the United States is a post-genocide society after its eradication of Native American people from their land. Consider these four phases and how this history impacts you and your community today:

1. Slavery

- Why was it important that slavery (and Native American genocide) solidified White people as distinct from Black people? How do you think this mindset affected the progression of Black people moving forward?
- Stevenson argues that every time there's progress for racial equality, there's a shift to impede that progress. Have you seen evidence of this in your own life and community? Where would you look to find out?
- How do you feel about the church's complicity in slavery? Is there a responsibility to this day to rectify that wrong? Why or why not?

2. Lynching

- What does Stevenson mean when he says the North won the civil war, but the South won the narrative war? Have you seen the effects of the "narrative war" today?

- How do you think the culture of lynching affected the consciences of all involved (perpetrators, witnesses, and the terrorized). Do you think these feelings passed through generations?
- How was the process of lynching moved inside the courtroom? What steps could we take to learn whether this bias still exists in our courtrooms today?

3. Segregation

- How did segregation perpetuate the notion from slavery that Black people are distinct from White people?
- How did segregation affect Black people in terms of education, job, and monetary prospects? How long do you suppose these impacts last? How does a community work to understand and rectify the effects of its wrongs? Are you aware of any efforts in your own community?
- Have you seen evidence of the history of segregation in your own life and community? How could you learn more about this?

4. Mass Incarceration and the Death Penalty

- From the 1970s to 2014, the prison population in the US increased from 300,000 to 2,300,000, the highest rate of incarceration in the world. Stevenson argues that mass incarceration is just an extension of the legacy of slavery, lynching, and segregation. Do you see the connection? How does the sharp increase in incarceration rates make you feel? Are you concerned about this?
- Stevenson claims that the death penalty is a form of legal lynching. What do you make of the error rate for death row prisoners? Does that affect your view on the death penalty?
- Why was it devastating to Stevenson that the Supreme Court admitted that a certain amount of bias is inevitable? Do you agree with Stevenson or the Court? Is equal justice under the law possible?
- How does your church or faith community approach the topics of inherent societal inequalities? Does the church have a role to play on these issues in society?

Stevenson's Clients

- How are Ray and Walter's upbringings implicated by the legacy of systemic racism in the United States?
- Ray recounted what his arresting officer said to him when Ray claimed he had arrested the wrong person. "I don't care whether you did or didn't do it," the officer said. "You are Black, a White man is going to say you shot him, there's a White prosecutor, a White judge, and White jury. Do you know what that spells? Conviction." Dwell on the words for a moment. Where does this sort of bias come from?
- How do Ray and Walter's stories make you feel? Were they in the wrong place at the wrong time? How does a community work to make sure such miscarriages of justice do not persist?

Progress

- Think about Stevenson and his story. How has this cycle of oppression, progress, and criminalization played out over the course of his family history? Which parts of his background do you think shaped him most significantly?
- Consider Stevenson's story about the swimming pool as a kid. Where do you think these parents' attitudes came from? How do you think this incident affected all of the kids involved?

- Why do you think that Stevenson is so dedicated to telling the full and truthful story of race in the US? What impact do you think this would have if other communities did the same?
- How did the experience of watching “True Justice” change you? What surprised you? Provoked you? Moved you? Prompted you to action?
- In your view, should the church play any role in influencing the criminal justice system? If yes, what might that look like? What concrete action might you take in leading your faith community forward?

Conclusion

- From his story, how do you think Stevenson’s faith inspired and impacted his work?
- At the end of the day, do you think Walter or Ray obtained justice?
- Think about Bryan Stevenson’s belief that “each of us is more than the worst thing we’ve ever done.” If you truly believed that, how might your own life change? If our society lived by that, how would our own community change?
- Consider the hope we have as Christians in the coming again of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Where do you see reasons to hope in this story? Where do you feel barriers to hope? What do you think are the sources of Bryan Stevenson’s hope? If you are part of different faith tradition, what is the spiritual source of your hope for change and transformation?

Looking Forward

"True Justice" offers a powerful story that is likely to stay with those who hear it. Think about how this documentary has impacted you, and what you would like to do with this new information. To continue learning, you can find a growing list of resources at www.theologicalhorizons.org/stevenson.

Closing Prayer

May the Lord Christ go with you, wherever He may send you.

May He guide you through the wilderness, protect you through the storm.

May He bring you home rejoicing at the wonders He has shown you.

May He bring you home rejoicing once again into our doors.

NOTES

ABOUT THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

Theological Horizons is a 501(c)(3) organization based in Charlottesville, VA. Established in 1990 by Karen and Charles Marsh, Theological Horizons cultivates an inviting forum for students, scholars and community members at the intersection of faith, thought, and life. All are welcome. Always.