



ACT JUSTLY,
LOVE MERCY.



A Just Mercy Movie Study for Community Members



The 2023 Scoper Lecture
in Christian Thought

SETTING THE STAGE

"Just Mercy" 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 movie, 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 *Just Mercy* 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—"Just Mercy" starring Michael B. Jordan, Jamie Foxx, and Brie Larson. 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, why you decided to participate in a group discussion on the movie, and what "just mercy" means to you.

History of Racism

Play two clips: 21:07-22:20 and 36:00-37:10

Questions:

- What does Walter mean when he says that he was guilty from the moment he was born? Can you imagine saying the same thing? Why or why not?
- What is the issue that Walter's family is discussing and why is it so problematic that it could lead to his framing for a murder?
- Consider Minnie's statement that she doesn't know what to tell her children because even if they are in their own home they can still easily be framed for a murder. How would you explain this to a Black or Brown child?
- What do you make of the argument that people of color face an unwarranted presumption of guilt in communities today? What evidence supports that statement? What evidence contradicts it?

Play two clips: 9:18-9:45 and 56:50-58:51

Questions:

- Imagine yourself as Bryan Stevenson's mother. What feelings, hopes or fears would you have? What advice would you give your son?
- Discuss Stevenson's run-in with the police. Why do you think they stopped him? Does this incident remind you of any other stories you've heard?

- How do you think the police would have treated him if he was not a Black man?
- Given what you've seen, was Stevenson's mother's concern justified? What would you say to your child in these circumstances?
- How does a community overcome inherent bias and acts of racism against citizens? Can you imagine one specific change that might make a difference? What are the barriers to change?

Play 15:30-17:15 and 1:44:45-1:45:40

Questions:

- Did you see the Confederate flag in the first scene? What does this symbol communicate to a Black person?
- Discuss Stevenson's interaction with the guard. Imagine that Stevenson was an older White man. What would that scenario look like?
- Why does Stevenson say no one wants to remember the city's history of slavery and racism? What are the barriers to remembrance? What are the rewards of remembrance?
- Is it important for a community to tell their town/city's history of racism? How does your community remember its history? If you had unlimited resources, what project would you propose for your community?

Other Questions:

- In the closing credits we learn that a new investigation confirmed Walter's innocence and a White man is strongly believed to have murdered Ronda Morrison, but no charges were ever filed. What thoughts and feelings come up as you read this?
- One of the major forces that Stevenson and his team come up against in Walter's case is law enforcement's desire for finality with Ronda Morrison's murder. They say it's been investigated and it's done, citing safety as their first concern. But in the end there's compelling evidence that they were motivated by racism against Walter. How can community members understand whether law enforcement is operating with biased motives?

Hope

Questions:

- Consider Stevenson's first and second meetings with Walter. What changed the tone of those meetings?
- Did you feel hopeful as you watched Walter's story play out? What were the highest and lowest moments of your hope?
- Given what you saw in this movie, do you feel hopeful about the future of the criminal justice system? Is society changing for the better? Why or why not? What is at the heart of EJI's impact?
- Tell a story of a time when something you experienced gave you hope in your own community, family or friend group? Of a story when you've struggled to have hope?
- Watch the closing credits (2:10:05-2:11:25). Which of these most affected you? Does it impact the hope you have in whether the criminal justice system in the US can be just? Can you name one concrete change you would like to see?

The Death Penalty

Play 1:12:35-1:21:35

Questions:

- What are the sources of emotional power in this scene?
- What do you make of Herbert's comment that no one had ever asked so many times before what they could do for him?
- Herbert was a veteran with debilitating PTSD. Do you think that should have been taken into account in his sentencing? How might those considerations affect the outcome?
- Can you think of a time when you had a conversation with someone else about the death penalty? What ideas, arguments and feelings came up?
- The closing credits tell us that for every nine people executed, one person on death row is proven innocent and released. What impact does that error rate have on your thinking about the death penalty?

Humanity

Play 4:48-8:28.

Questions:

- Discuss this show of humanity with Henry, a man in an undeniably desperate situation.
- What does the impact of human connection on Henry say about those on death row?
- 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?
- Why is it important to see the humanity of people who are imprisoned? What specific steps might we take to begin to better see and understand those experiencing incarceration?

Play 1:38:28-1:39:06

Questions:

- Why was this a significant moment? Do you remember how this guard treated Stevenson earlier in the movie? What accounts for this change?
- What does this say about the capability of the human heart?

Conclusion

- At the end of the day, do you think Walter 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?
- What were your main takeaways from "Just Mercy"? Has it changed the way you see the criminal justice system? Your community? Yourself?
- What is one hope that Bryan Stevenson has sparked within you? What action might you take to make it a reality?

Looking Forward

"Just Mercy" offers a powerful story that is likely to stay with those who hear it. Think about how this movie 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.

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.