



ACT JUSTLY,  
LOVE MERCY.



## *A One-Time Just Mercy Book Study for Students*



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.

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 read "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.

**Discussion Options:** Read "Just Mercy" before gathering as a group. This story offers many compelling narratives, themes, and issues. 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, your year in school, whether you were familiar with Bryan Stevenson or EJI before this study, and why you decided to participate in a group discussion on the book.

### **Mass Incarceration**

**Overview:** The introduction describes mass incarceration in the United States, noting that from the 1970s to 2014, the prison population increased from 300,000 to 2,300,000. This is the highest incarceration rate in the world, and has impacted all walks of life, from men and women to even children. And with one in every three Black men expected to be imprisoned at some point in their lives, race plays a significant role in incarceration. In addition to this, the imprisonment of people is profitable for stakeholders, thereby incentivizing the for-profit prison system to lobby lawmakers to keep incarceration rates high, which in turn drives profits. Our community is not immune from racialized policing, and in 2020 an independent review of the Charlottesville and Albemarle police forces showed that Black people were disproportionately arrested, and that race-based disparities exist in the treatment of individuals in otherwise similar situations.

#### **Questions:**

- What do you make of the rapid increase of incarceration in the United States? Can you imagine—or have you heard of any—alternative methods towards rehabilitation for non-violent offenders?
- Stevenson asserts that it's better to be rich and guilty than it is to be poor and innocent in U.S. criminal justice systems. How does this play out in the book? Have you seen examples of this in your own life, in your community or in the national news?
- Consider Stevenson's violent encounter with the police, and then think of your own growing up. What were you told about law enforcement and how to act during encounters with police? What does Stevenson's story help you better understand about what Black men and women might experience? How does this make you feel? How would you suggest law enforcement improve relations between police and the public?

- Who is your District or Commonwealth’s Attorney? How might you learn more about this person’s stance on jail time for non-violent offenses?
- Throughout the course of your education, when and how have you been educated on the history of racism in the United States? Did you find this education sufficient? If no, how would you change it?

### The Death Penalty

Overview: While the death penalty was outlawed by Virginia in 2021, all other southern states still use capital punishment. Stevenson notes that in every nine people that have been executed, one person has been freed from death row due to wrongful conviction. This is a staggering error rate when someone’s life is at stake. Further, Stevenson grapples with the question of not whether his clients deserve to die, but whether we—as a society—deserve to kill.

#### Questions:

- 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?
- Stevenson cites studies that revealed offenders in Georgia were eleven times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim was White than if the victim was Black. And in Alabama, even though 65 percent of all homicide victims were Black, nearly 80 percent of the people on death row were there for crimes against victims who were White. Black defendant and White victim pairings increased the likelihood of a death sentence even more. What do you make of the fact that race plays a role in sentencing? Does it influence your feelings on the death penalty?
- What do you make of Stevenson’s logic that we don’t sanction rapists to be raped, so why would we kill someone who kills?
- Death row prisoners describe the tradition of banging on their cells as an inmate is being escorted to their death. Take a moment to imagine the sights and sounds of that experience. Discuss the feelings this brings up for you. What does it say about human needs and impulses?
- Has this book and Stevenson’s story influenced the way you think about the death penalty? Why or why not?

### Children and Excessive Punishment

Overview: In the book we encounter numerous people who are imprisoned for crimes committed as children. Trina, Joe, Ian, Antonio, and Charlie are all serving life sentences without the chance of parole. And while they are imprisoned, they suffer abuse, isolation, and mistreatment that leaves permanent emotional and physical scars.

Questions:

- What do the children whose stories are covered have in common? Do you think these circumstances should have been considered during sentencing? How might those considerations have changed the outcomes?
- Stevenson highlights the reality that many Black and Brown children develop criminal records for behavior that more affluent children engage in with impunity. Think about your childhood, your friends, and family members. Can you think of a childhood story when you or someone you know did something that, given different circumstances, could have led to criminal charges? What arguments can be made for and against charging a child as an adult? How has Bryan Stevenson's stories impacted the way you think about this issue?
- What measures would you implement to protect children who are incarcerated?
- In chapter 8, Stevenson discusses George Stinney's story and execution. How did reading this story make you feel? Do you think the attitudes that led to his accusation and execution still exist today?

### Walter's Story

Overview: With no credible evidence against him, Walter McMillan is accused of murdering Ronda Morrison in Monroe County, Alabama. Behind law enforcement's suspicion is Walter's intimate involvement with a White woman, an unthinkable combination in the 1970s American south. Stevenson tells Walter's story from beginning to end, starting with Ralph Myers' coerced fabricated accusation, to Walter's ultimate release. There are many setbacks along the way, but Stevenson and his team at EJI eventually win Walter his freedom, though not without a significant toll on his physical and mental health.

Questions:

- Take some time to talk through Walter's story. What strikes you as the most significant miscarriages of justice that occurred?
- While Stevenson is meeting Walter's family, do you think he is confident Walter will be freed? How would you handle that situation?
- What were your reactions to the state joining Walter's petition and the court ruling in his favor? Did it give you hope in the state of Monroeville's criminal justice system?
- Walter was freed from death row, but his wrongful conviction and incarceration took a toll on his family. Imagine yourself in his wife's position. Imagine yourself in his children's position. How might you feel? How might you make sense of past events?
- Discuss Walter's lasting physical and mental scars from his time on death row. At the end of the day, do you think he obtained justice?

### The History of Racism in Charlottesville

Overview: Charlottesville is not free from the impact of historic racism or mass incarceration. Take, for example, the long battle over the confederate statues downtown. While there's a popular misconception that the statues are a part of Civil War history, they were not placed at the conclusion of the war, but over fifty years later in the early 20th century to intimidate thriving Black communities in the Vinegar Hill neighborhood.

### Questions:

- Do you think that the history of racism in Charlottesville has affected its criminal justice system? Where might you go to learn about this history? Does your school offer classes, clubs, or field trips to learn about this history in your community?
- A 2020 report concludes that Charlottesville and Albemarle disproportionately arrest Black people, and that race-based disparities exist in the treatment of individuals in otherwise similar situations. What do you make of this? If you had the power to make one change in this dynamic, what would you do? Have you seen this issue addressed in Charlottesville? How did that go? What action can you take from where you are?

### Purposeful Life

Overview: In the introduction, Stevenson admits that he didn't know what he wanted to do with his life professionally. However, he did know that it would have something to do with the lives of the poor, America's history of racial inequity, and the struggle to be equitable and fair with one another. He also knew he wanted his work to connect to his life experiences and things he'd wondered about, but again he was not certain how this fit together in a career path. He ended up at law school because—unlike other graduate programs—they didn't require him to know anything in particular to enroll.

### Questions:

- As students, there's an ever-present question of what you will do with your lives. Stevenson discussed his grandmother's background and how that impacted his career choices. What from your own personal background has influenced your desired career choices? Has any one person especially influenced you?
- Do you feel inspired professionally by Stevenson's story? Do you see yourself in the criminal justice field? What steps might take you there?
- How else might you take what you've learned from "Just Mercy" into a career?

### 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 book 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](http://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.