

Exploring the Death Penalty & Restorative Justice in the Bible

Bible Study is a great way to explore the Word of God and to understand His teachings. These various passages explore God's mercy intertwined with justice. The opening reflection and guiding question will allow your Bible Study to reflect on how mercy and justice can be applied in our own society.

1st Reading-Gen 4:2-16 (Cain and Abel)

Consider what St. John Paul II wrote about this passage in his encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*

...And yet God, who is always merciful even when he punishes, "put a mark on Cain, lest any who came upon him should kill him" (Gen 4:15). He thus gave him a distinctive sign, not to condemn him to the hatred of others, but to protect and defend him from those wishing to kill him, even out of a desire to avenge Abel's death. Not even a murderer loses his personal dignity, and God himself pledges to guarantee this. And it is precisely here that the paradoxical mystery of the merciful justice of God is shown forth. As Saint Ambrose writes: "Once the crime is admitted at the very inception of this sinful act of parricide, then the divine law of God's mercy should be immediately extended.



If punishment is forthwith inflicted on the accused, then men in the exercise of justice would in no way observe patience and moderation, but would straightaway condemn the defendant to punishment. ... God drove Cain out of his presence and sent him into exile far away from his native land, so that he passed from a life of human kindness to one which was more akin to the rude existence of a wild beast. God, who preferred the correction rather than the death of a sinner, did not desire that a homicide be punished by the exaction of another act of homicide"...

Guiding Questions for Discussion

- What stood out to you in this passage? Any particular phrases? Why?
- What does Cain mean when he says "am I my brother's keeper?" In what ways does God call us to be our brother's keeper today?
- Why is the Mark of Cain significant and how do you think this is a display of God's mercy?



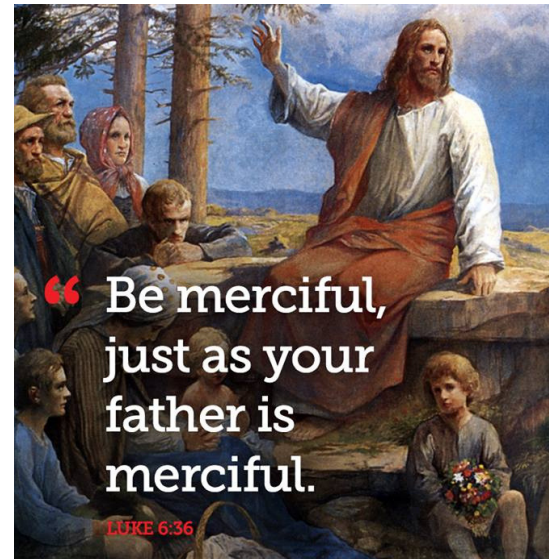
2nd Reading- Lk 6:27-43 (Love of Enemies)

Consider this reflection on Lk 6:36-38 by Pope Francis during a papal audience on Wednesday, 21 September 2016

We ask ourselves: What does it mean for disciples to be merciful? Jesus explains this with two verbs: “forgive” (Lk 6:37) and “give” (v. 38).

Mercy is expressed, first of all, in forgiveness: “Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven” (v. 37). Jesus does not intend to undermine the course of human justice, he does, however, remind his disciples that in order to have fraternal relationships they must suspend judgment and condemnation. Forgiveness, in fact, is the pillar that holds up the life of the Christian community, because it shows the gratuitousness with which God has loved us first.

The Christian must forgive! Why? Because he has been forgiven. All of us who are here today, in the Square, we have been forgiven. There is not one of us who, in our own life, has had no need of God’s forgiveness. And because we have been forgiven, we must forgive. We recite this every day in the Our Father: “Forgive us our sins; forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”. That is, to forgive offenses, to forgive many things, because we have been forgiven of many offenses, of many sins. In this way it is easy to forgive: if God has forgiven me, why do I not forgive others? Am I greater than God? This pillar of forgiveness shows us the gratuitousness of the love of God, who loved us first. Judging and condemning a brother who sins is wrong. Not because we do not want to recognize sin, but because condemning the sinner breaks the bond of fraternity with him and spurns the mercy of God, who does not want to renounce any of his children. We do not have the power to condemn our erring brother, we are not above him: rather, we have a duty to recover the dignity of a child of the Father and to accompany him on his journey of conversion.



Guiding Questions for Discussion

- What stood out to you in this passage? Any particular phrases? Why?
- Is our culture a culture of mercy? Why or why not? How can we live out Jesus' call for mercy?
- How does Lk 6:40 "No disciple is superior to the teacher; but when fully trained, every disciple will be like his teacher." relate to God's mercy and how we are to show Justice.
- How does this Gospel reveal the relationship between Justice and Mercy?

3rd Reading: John 8:1-11 (The Woman Caught in Adultery)



Consider this reflection on John 8:1-11 by Pope Benedict XVI

The Gospel passage recounts the episode of the adulterous woman in two vivid scenes: in the first, we witness a dispute between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees concerning a woman caught in flagrant adultery who, in accordance with the prescriptions of the Book of Leviticus (cf. 20: 10), was condemned to stoning. In the second scene, a brief but moving dialogue develops between Jesus and the sinner-woman...Jesus immediately took the side of the woman. In the first place...Jesus spoke the sentence that was to become famous: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn 8: 7) and begin the stoning. St Augustine noted, commenting on John's Gospel, that: "The Lord, in his response, neither failed to respect the law nor departed from his meekness". And Augustine added that with these words, Jesus obliged the accusers to look into themselves, to examine themselves to see whether they too were sinners. Thus, "pierced through as if by a dart as big as a beam, one after another, they all withdrew"



So it was, therefore, that the accusers who had wished to provoke Jesus went away one by one, "beginning with the eldest to the last". When they had all left, the divine Teacher remained alone with the woman. St Augustine's comment is concise and effective: the two were left alone, the wretched woman and Mercy". Let us pause, dear brothers and sisters, to contemplate this scene where the wretchedness of man and Divine Mercy come face to face, a woman accused of a grave sin and the One who, although he was sinless, burdened himself with our sins, the sins of the whole world. The One who had bent down to write in the dust, now raised his eyes and met those of the woman. He did not ask for explanations. Is it not ironic when he asked the woman: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (8: 10). And his reply was overwhelming: "Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (8: 11). Again, St Augustine in his Commentary observed: "The Lord did also condemn, but condemned sins, not man. For if he were a patron of sin, he would say, "neither will I condemn you; go, live as you will; be secure in my deliverance; however much you sin, I will deliver you from all punishment'. He said not this".

Guiding Questions for Discussion

- What stood out to you about the Gospel? Any particular phrases? Why?
- Do the scribes and the scribes and Pharisees attitude towards justice related our society's view on justice? If so in what ways?
- What does Jesus telling the woman, "go and sin no more." teach us about the relationship between justice and mercy