



High School Teens Discussion Guide

Description - "Justice... Mercy... Grace"

In a world where information moves at the speed of lightning today's teens expect quick, easy answers. The desire for solutions to be "black and white" are upended by the many levels of "gray areas" we enter into. Teens are challenged by the Church's teachings on issues such as marriage, abortion and human rights. In this session teens are led through a process to help them understand the differences between justice, mercy and grace and how these concepts are ones that require considerable thought and attention. Shared through the story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-16) teens will pray, discuss and learn how capital punishment interferes with God's gift of grace.

Overview - working with Teens

What do we know about Teens?

- Technologically adept, but over-connected
 - They don't know how to "unplug"; they feel it necessary to be connected 24/7
- Over-committed to extracurricular activities
 - Time for family, friends, faith often sacrificed for sports, academics, other activities
 - Often over-worked, over-tired, feeling unable to say "no"
- They feel empowered and mature enough to question authority, government, society, church hierarchy, etc.
 - Passionate about issues, but sometimes challenged by connecting to their faith
 - They see themselves as "spiritual" more so than "religious"
 - Are most comfortable seeing Jesus as a "friend" rather than God, teacher or leader
- Need their faith concretized in order to embrace
 - Result-driven, direct service speaks to their spirituality
 - Moving from service to advocacy is a challenge

Approaching difficult teachings with Teens

Justice

- Teens desire justice for others and themselves
 - Challenged by what they see as the Church abandoning certain groups of people in the name of orthodoxy

Mercy

- Teens struggle with forgiveness
 - Difficult to give, even more difficult to ask for
- Concepts of mercy and justice often seem at odds with one another
 - People that have done evil deserve justice, not mercy
 - Linking mercy to justice doesn't seem logical

Grace

- Abstract concept for most
 - A freely given gift with no expectation of return is a foreign concept

Sample Session

The sample session below - "Justice... Mercy... Grace" - should be considered freely adaptable for your needs.

"Justice... Mercy... Grace"

Overview

Through a prayer, scripture and discussion participants will seek to better understand the differences between justice, mercy and grace and how these concepts are ones that require considerable thought and attention.

Themes

- Justice, Mercy, Grace, Capital Punishment, Reconciliation, Church Teaching

Suggested Time

- 45-60 minutes

Group Size

- Adaptable to groups of any size

Materials Needed

- Whiteboard or poster paper, scenarios, notepaper and writing instruments so groups may record responses

Opening Prayer - A Prayer for Mercy

by Sr. Kathie Uhler, Order of St. Francis

O Jesus, you forgave the Good Thief from your cross, at your own execution.

You exonerated the woman caught in adultery, because no one was without guilt.

You wept with his sisters at the loss of Lazarus.

You wept over Jerusalem, over the blindness of the people.

O Jesus, you taught us to transcend racism, like the Good Samaritan.

You showed us the unconditional love and forgiveness of the Father to his Prodigal Son; and the heavenly way of extreme benevolence as the sun shines equally on the good and the bad, and when the last and least were rewarded as the first and the best.

Help us to learn your ways, O Jesus, of ceaseless forgiving and boundless mercy and trust of our brothers and sisters, especially those convicted of capital crimes.

Help us to take up the cross of unconditional love each day, with you, O Jesus, along the hallways and streets and rows of our lives.

Amen.

Prayer cards (4 to a sheet, front and back) can be downloaded at http://catholicmobilizing.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/CMN_English_Prayer_Card_generic_rev_10_2012_4up.pdf)



"Cain murdering Abel"
by Bartolomeo Manfredi

The Setup

Say to the group:

Throughout our history the Catholic Church has taught that governments and societies have the right to protect themselves from individuals that break the law, even going so far as to put them to death. However, in recent years our church has moved towards a teaching that emphasizes mercy. Even the second edition of the Catechism of the Catholic Church - published in 1997 - was modified to reflect this new understanding of the church's approach to capital punishment, and how it relates to respect life issues.

This is still a very challenging teaching for many to understand or accept. Today we're going to look at this teaching and three important elements of it - justice, mercy, and grace - through the story of Cain and Abel.

Large Group Process (15-30 minutes)

- Ask the group what they know or remember about the story of Cain and Abel. Most should have a pretty good level of familiarity with the tale of Cain's jealousy, anger, the murder of his brother Abel and God's reaction. Do not correct any inaccuracies - allow the participants to share. After they have had a few moments to share, do the following, which is a modified Lectio Divina process. Say:
 - I am going to read you the story of Cain and Abel. I want you to be quiet, relax, and just LISTEN. No discussion, just listen.
 - Read the story (Genesis 4:1-16)
- After a moment, explain:
 - I'm going to read the passage again. This time, I want you to listen for a specific word or phrase that stands out to you. After I finish reading I want you to share with a couple neighbors your word or phrase and explain why that stood out to you.
- Read the story a second time. After giving the participants a few moments to share with one another, ask willing participants to share with the large group some of the words and/or phrases that stood out to them. Make sure you receive a variety of answers. Typical responses may include "the Lord looked with favor," "Why are you angry?" and "Am I my brother's keeper?" Explain:
 - As you can see, scripture will say different things to different people. It will even say different things to you each time you listen to it or read it. This is because we are in a different place emotionally or mentally each time we approach scripture. It allows us to understand God's Word in new ways and help us grow spiritually.
- Explain that you will read the passage one final time. This time, instruct the participants they are to listen to the story as a whole. After reading, debrief by asking the following questions:
 - We've now read the story three times - was there anything in the story that surprised you, or was different than you remembered?
 - Was there anything you didn't understand about the story, but feel you now understand better?
 - What do you feel the story says about relationships? Between Cain and Abel? Abel and God? Cain and God?
- Thank the group for their willingness to share.

Small Group Discussion - Justice (10-15 minutes)

Say to the group:

We're now going to look at three different themes of the story of Cain and Abel - justice, mercy and grace - and how those themes inform the Catholic Church's approach to capital punishment.

- Write on the whiteboard/poster paper the phrase “Justice means you get what you deserve.” Explain:
 - Justice means you get what you **deserve**. We’re going break up into small groups and look at some scenarios. For each scenario consider the crime and what your group feels is an appropriate punishment considering the crime. Make sure you stick to the facts of the scenario - don’t assume things that aren’t there. After a few minutes we’ll share your answers with the large group.
- Divide into groups. Try to keep groups to no more than five participants. Give each group one of the following scenarios to discuss. Instruct them to take notes for sharing with the large group. Scenarios:
 - **Sue** has been arrested for robbery. She has stolen nearly \$400 of products from a store. She is a multiple offender who has been given probation in the past for similar offenses. This is her third time being brought up on charges.
 - **Jamal** has been arrested for robbery. He has stolen more than \$500 of drugs from a pharmacy. Even though this is his first arrest the pharmacy has been robbed before without an offender being caught. Jamal is suspected in the previous robberies.
 - **Maria** has been arrested for assault and battery. She beat her victim and when police arrived she was threatening the victim with a knife. She was also charged with resisting arrest. The victim as adamant about pressing charges.
 - **Dan** has been arrested for murder. The victim was someone Dan was known to have an ongoing conflict with. The victim’s family and friends are adamant that Dan is prosecuted to the full extent of the law because of their loss.
- After time to discuss scenarios, invite individual groups to share their scenario and responses (if two of more groups used the same scenario, have them respond immediately after the first group). After each sharing, invite others in the room to respond to the small group decision. Make sure emphasis is placed on not assuming other facts not in evidence. After allowing time to share, explain:
 - We are now going to move to the second theme, mercy.

Large Group Discussion - Mercy (10-15 minutes)

Process

- Write on the whiteboard/poster paper the phrase “Mercy means you get what you deserve.” Ask:
 - Look at this phrase a moment. How can it be modified to reflect our understanding of mercy?
- After a few responses, draw the international symbol for “No” - a circle with a line through it - over the word “get” in the phrase. Explain:
 - Mercy means you **don’t get** what you deserve. To some justice means “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” or achieving some sense of balance through punishment. Mercy allows those that have been wronged the opportunity to grant forgiveness. Forgiveness does not mean we forget the crime, it doesn’t mean we do not punish the offender, it does not mean we ignore the needs of the victim. But it does create a context within which God’s grace can flourish.
 - We are going to look at the scenarios again. This time, with a few more facts. Consider whether these facts may change your idea or the ideas of others as to what the appropriate punishment should be.
- Read the following scenario revisions. After each, ask the group if they now feel the punishment should be different.
 - **Sue** has been arrested for robbery. She has stolen products from a grocery store. She been arrested in the past for the same offense. She is living below the poverty level, cannot find work, and was taking food and baby products for her family.

- **Jamal** has been arrested for robbery. He has stolen non-prescription drugs from a pharmacy. Jamal is elderly and cannot afford prescription medicine for himself or his wife. The products he took were a variety of painkillers and first aid supplies.
- **Maria** has been arrested for assault and battery. She fought back when her boyfriend physically abused her and threatened her children. When the man threatened to kill her she grabbed a knife from the kitchen to protect herself.
- **Dan** has been arrested for murder. Seen as a loner and “weird” by many, he was continually bullied by the victim. Because Dan often feels threatened legally carries a gun. When cornered in an alley and threatened, Dan fired in self-defense.
- Controlling the group discussion is important here. Some participants will have strong reactions. Remind the group we’re not here to argue or to say someone is “right” or “wrong” but to understand that we all have differing ideas of justice and mercy. Ask the following questions to debrief:
 - Did your opinion of the type of punishment change after hearing the scenario revisions? Why or why not?
 - How would your opinion be different if someone committed a crime against one of your own family members? A close friend?
 - How would your opinion be different if it was a close family member accused of the crime? A close friend?
- After allowing some participants to share explain:
 - Pope Francis in one of his first public statements said “Mercy is the Lord’s most powerful message. It is not easy to trust oneself to the mercy of God, because His mercy is an unfathomable abyss - but we must do it!” For us this means we must trust in God’s mercy, and we are also called to grant mercy to others.
 - Now that we’ve looked at justice and mercy - we’ll move on to grace.

Large Group Presentation (10 minutes)

Process

- Write on the whiteboard/poster paper the phrase “Grace means you get what you deserve.” Ask:
 - Look at this phrase a moment. How can it be modified to reflect our understanding of grace?
- After a few responses, draw the international symbol for “No” - a circle with a line through it - over the word “deserve” in the phrase. Explain:
 - Grace means you get what you **don’t deserve**. It is from grace that all blessings flow. Grace is a gift freely given to us by God, a gift we as sinners don’t deserve but are given anyway.
 - Through grace we don’t receive punishments for our sins, but are granted mercy. But mercy doesn’t mean we aren’t to take responsibility for our wrongdoing. Let’s turn back to the story of Cain and Abel and see where in the story justice, mercy and grace occur.
- Read for a final time Genesis 4:1-16. After reading, ask the group the following:
 - Where does justice occur in the story? (Genesis 4:11-12 - God punishes Cain)
 - Where does mercy occur in the story? (Genesis 4:14 - rather than put Cain to death God banishes him)
 - Where does grace occur in the story? (Genesis 4:15 - God declares that no one else will seek vengeance against Cain)
 - How can this passage from scripture help us understand the Catholic Church teaching on capital punishment?

The Takeaway

- God loves justice, we should be people that seek justice in our world
 - Psalm 37:28, Matthew 25:40
- We are to be people of mercy and compassion
 - Exodus 33:19
- God's grace is freely given to everyone
 - Romans 4:16

Wrap-Up (5 minutes)

As scripture demonstrates, justice, mercy and grace are connected in our understanding of how we should approach crime and punishment. When we sentence someone to death, we say we are not people of mercy and compassion, and we interfere with the opportunity for God's grace to continue to work towards redemption in the person's life.



Clip art licensed from the
Clip Art Gallery on DiscoverySchool.com

Closing Prayer

A Prayer to Abolish the Death Penalty by Sister Helen Prejean, C.S.J.

God of Compassion, you let your rain fall on the just and the unjust.

Expand and deepen our hearts so that we may love as You love, even those among us who have caused the greatest pain by taking life.

For there is in our land a great cry for vengeance as we fill up death rows and kill the killers in the name of justice, in the name of peace.

Jesus, our brother, you suffered execution at the hands of the state but you did not let hatred overcome you.

Help us to reach out to victims of violence so that our enduring love may help them heal.

Holy Spirit of God, you strengthen us in the struggle for justice.

Help us to work tirelessly for the abolition of state-sanctioned death and to renew our society in its very heart so that violence will be no more.

Amen.

Notes

Scripture Connections

- Genesis 4:1-16
- Psalm 37:28
- Matthew 25:40
- Exodus 33:19
- Romans 4:16

Additional Connections

- Catechism of the Catholic Church - CCC 2267

*Development of this workshop funded in part by a grant from
Our Sunday Visitor Foundation*