



OVERVIEW

The movie “Just Mercy” tells the true story of Walter McMillian, a Black man on death row for a crime he didn’t commit, and Bryan Stevenson, the lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit organization which provides legal representation to people who have been illegally convicted, unfairly sentenced, or abused in state jails and prisons. Stevenson is also a committed follower of Jesus, whose faith deeply informs his work.

The movie is free to stream online via several different platforms throughout the month of June. This discussion guide is designed to come alongside parents and youth workers who want to use the film as launching pad for conversations with their students about racism, justice, and faith. While we hope this discussion guide is useful for everyone, it is specifically written by and for White followers of Jesus hoping to grow in our love and empathy for our Black brothers and sisters.

QUESTIONS:

- ▶ At the very beginning of the film, when Walter was pulled over by the police, he put his hands on top of the steering wheel even though he knew he’d done nothing wrong. Why do you think he did that?
- ▶ Bryan’s mom was scared for him to move to the South. How would you feel if there was an entire part of our country you were scared to go to because of how you look? How would your view of America change if there were whole sections of it you were scared to live in?

- ▶ Other than Bryan's job as a lawyer, what jobs did you notice that black people had in this movie? Do you think that's significant? Why or why not?
- ▶ What is different about the neighborhoods the black families live in compared to the white families? Why do you think that difference exists?
- ▶ What did you think Bryan felt when he was forced to strip before going in to see his clients? Why do you think the corrections officer forced him to do that?
- ▶ Walter said he was in jail because, "I look like a man who could kill somebody." Walter's death row inmate friend, Anthony, was told he was guilty because of "how he looked." Do you think black men are viewed differently in our society than other people? How so? Can you think of examples where you've seen someone treated differently because of their skin color?
- ▶ In **Luke 10:25-37**, Jesus told a story where a Samaritan, an ethnic group hated by and discriminated against by many devout Jews, was the hero of the story, and the religious/political leaders in the story were the bad guys. Why do you think Jesus framed the story in this way? What point was he trying to make?
- ▶ The town used Walter's mistakes in the past to cast guilt on who he was when the murder took place. Do you think that was fair? In what ways do people still do this today?
- ▶ In **John 8:1-11**, a woman who has committed adultery was about to be stoned to death. Even though she had committed adultery, Jesus stepped in to stop the people in power from killing her. Why do you think He did that? Can you think of any connections between that story and the work Bryan did in this movie?
- ▶ Walter's Vietnam Vet friend, Herbert, was guilty of killing a woman. He also had severe PTSD from fighting in the Vietnam War. Do you think he deserved to be executed? What other options could there have been? Do you think it's possible for someone to be guilty and yet still be punished too much?
- ▶ Eva Ansley, the white woman working with Bryan, said, "I don't need people to like me as long as I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." Have you ever felt pressure to overlook something that was wrong because you were afraid of what other people would think? If you could go back in time, what would you do differently?
- ▶ Herbert, the Vietnam Vet, said, "more people asked if they can help me today [the day of his execution] than have ever asked in my whole life." What do you think might have been different in Herbert's life if people had tried to help him when he got back from war? How could things have been different?
- ▶ How did you feel after watching the execution scene? Did it make you feel any differently about the death penalty? Why or why not?
- ▶ This movie was set at a time less than 40 years ago. In the end credits we find out Anthony was released just five years ago. The sheriff who had deliberately perverted justice to put and keep Walter in jail was reelected six more times, and was in office up until last year. How does that make you feel to know this story happened so recently?
- ▶ Is there anything you feel differently about after watching this film? What is one thing you can do next?