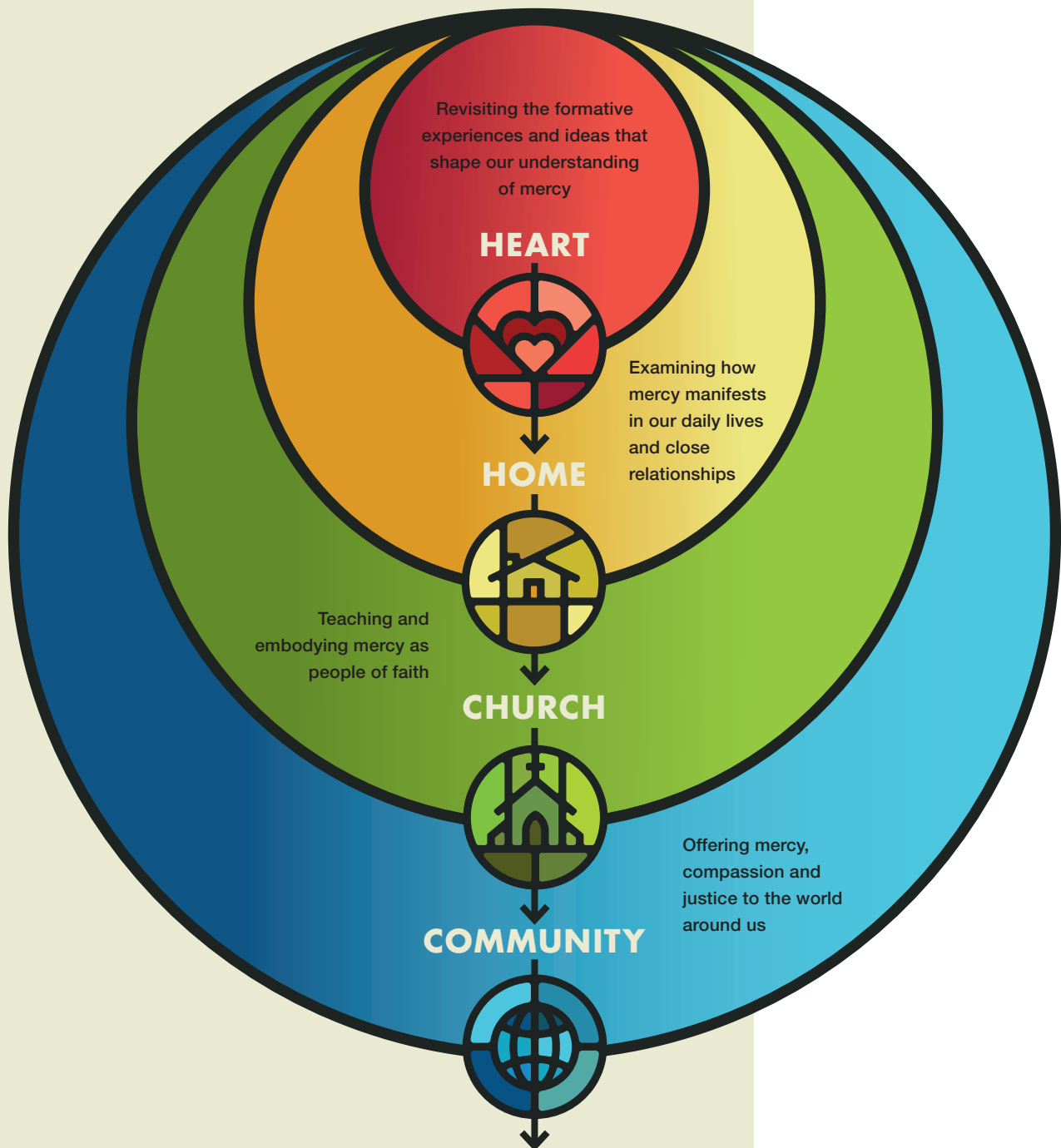


**THE**  
**MERCY**  
**JOURNEY**

Bringing hope and healing  
to a broken world

This guide is part of *The Mercy Journey* collection, a data-driven exploration of the topic of mercy, based on Barna research conducted in partnership with The Reimagine Group. This resource is set up to first inspire reflection and then action, moving outward from our **hearts**, to our **homes**, to our **churches** and, finally, to our **communities**.

## THE MERCY JOURNEY MAP



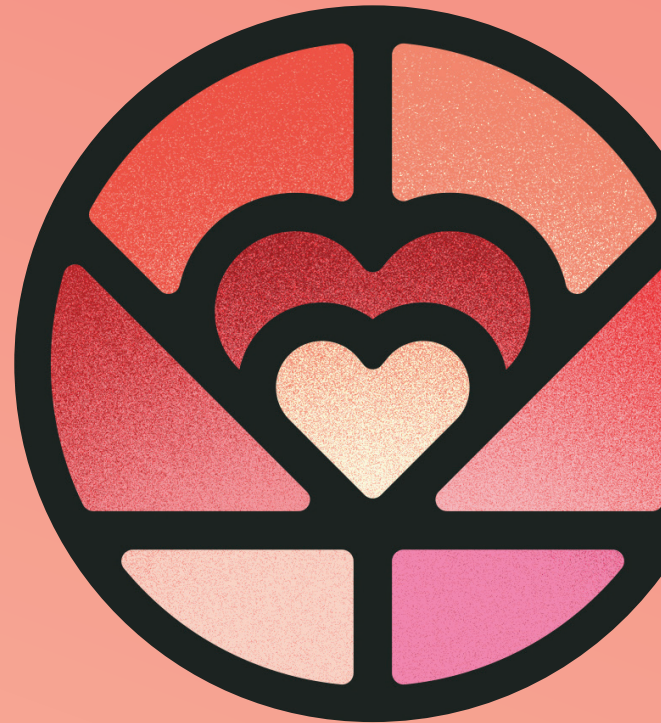
# MERCY IN OUR HEARTS

## INTRODUCTION (10 min.)

Welcome to *The Mercy Journey*! Thank you for embarking on this four-session exploration of mercy, as we seek to follow scripture's mandate to "love mercy" (Micah 6:8). With God's Word, prayer and mutual trust as our foundation, this time together has the potential to change us from the inside out—heart to home, church to community.

Throughout this study, we'll be interacting with data and thought-provoking research conducted by Barna Group, in partnership with The Reimagine Group. Barna is a research firm that studies the intersection of faith and culture, primarily in the United States. The findings of this particular study are covered more in depth in the report *The Mercy Journey*, which you can find at [barna.com/mercyjourney](http://barna.com/mercyjourney). But we will look at some key data points each week to help guide our discussions. These findings will help us understand current prevailing attitudes and expressions of mercy within American churches and across our country at large.

We probably can all sense that there are some major divisions and tensions in our culture right now. Some words that pop up regularly in as Barna gauges atmospheres and attitudes in the U.S. include: Tense. Divided. Broken. Hostile. Vitriolic. Isolated. Anxious. Unjust. Skeptical. Perhaps they ring true to your own experience, or at least call to mind recent headlines. In this contested climate, when it seems like the loudest



voice often wins, it can be tempting to root faith expression in having the right ideas, the clearest doctrine, the best arguments. But, as representatives of the whole gospel, Christians have an opportunity to be not only messengers of truth but also ministers of mercy in our homes, workplaces, churches and communities.

This world, now more than ever, needs the kind of mercy God calls his children to express in order to move forward and heal from the brokenness of sin, hatred and division.

This is what this four-part series is all about. It's designed to help us walk in our calling to be ministers of mercy, ambassadors of compassion and agents of forgiveness in a world that desperately needs it. In order to do so, we must experience and express mercy in our hearts, in our homes, in our churches and in our communities. When we do, the whole gospel is proclaimed, hearts are transformed, and lives are forever changed.

So let's get started.

## Opening questions:

1. How would you define “mercy”?
2. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines mercy as “compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one’s power to punish or harm.” Do you remember a time you did something wrong, got caught, knew a punishment was surely coming, but were shown mercy? If so, explain what happened and how you remember feeling. What did you learn about mercy that day?
3. As a Christian, do you think there are additional facets to the definition of “mercy” than that offered by Oxford? (possible answers: Christ’s death and sacrifice, unconditional forgiveness, compassion, serving those in need)

## Leader:

By dictionary definition, mercy may sound simple—it’s the extension of forgiveness or compassion toward another, typically by someone who has the authority to punish that person instead. For the Christ follower, mercy is so much more than this. It’s a vital part of the gospel that’s saved us and that we are charged to proclaim. As such, it’s a calling, a perspective and a way of life that defines who we are as those who carry the name of Jesus.

The truth is we all carry various ideas and definitions of mercy. Some are accurate, well grounded in the truth of scripture and derived from healthy relationships and positive influences. Other false or painful perceptions of mercy may have been born from past hurts, unresolved conflict, fractured relationships and tainted messages portrayed in the media or by other external influences.

On our mercy journey, we’ll look to God’s Word—namely, the book of Ephesians—to discover what true mercy looks like and how it can transform our hearts, our homes, our church and our community.

Let’s pray, asking God to work in us and through us as we embark on The Mercy Journey.

*(Leader prays.)*

## REFLECT & DISCUSS (20 min.)

As documented in *The Mercy Journey* report, a 2018 survey from Barna Group found the following prevailing attitudes toward mercy in the American Church:

- 22% of practicing Christians report struggling with receiving forgiveness for something they have personally done wrong.
  - \* What do you think are common things people struggle to receive forgiveness for?
  - \* If you’re comfortable, share a time when you struggled to receive forgiveness for something. What held you back? If you broke through, what helped you do so?
- 23% of practicing Christians have a person in their life who “they just can’t forgive.”
  - \* What do you think makes it difficult to forgive?
  - \* Again, if you’re comfortable, share a time you struggled to offer forgiveness to someone. What made it so challenging? Share your story with us, including what eventually helped you forgive that person.

## READ & RESPOND (20 min.)

Let's open and read Ephesians 2:1–10.

- Take a look at verses 1–3.
  - \* What was life like before you met Jesus? Do these three verses accurately describe that life? If so, how?
- Verses 4–9 bring the good news into view.
  - \* How is your life different after being saved by Jesus? How does this demonstrate the truth that God is “rich in mercy”?
  - \* How does remembering your life before knowing Jesus help you understand and grasp what mercy really means?
- In verse 10, Paul says “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.”
  - \* What do you think it means to be “God’s handiwork”?
  - \* What are the “good works” God has prepared us to do? Where / how does mercy fit into those good works?

## APPLY & PRAY (10 min.)

*Let's consider these questions and use them to pray for ourselves and each other as we end our time together today.*

1. *How has God shown me mercy? Have I fully accepted his love and forgiveness? Is there any guilt or shame keeping me from fully grasping his mercy that I need to release?*
2. *Celebrate the good news of the gospel of mercy! “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ!”*
3. *Is there someone in my life I have yet to forgive? Is God calling me to do so today? Am I willing to embark on the journey toward forgiveness and mercy? Pray for strength and courage to do so.*

# MERCY IN OUR HOMES



## INTRODUCTION (10 min.)

In case you missed our last session, we're on *The Mercy Journey*, a four-session exploration of mercy.

Guided by the book of Ephesians, we're endeavoring to understand and embrace a biblical view of mercy, and let it impact our hearts, homes, churches and communities.

Last time we were together, we discussed our past experiences with and understanding of mercy. We explored the truth that God is rich in mercy and the impact of embracing his mercy on our hearts. Today, we're going to see how mercy, kindness and forgiveness affect our relationships at home. The passage of scripture we'll be focusing on specifically addresses the relationship between husband and wife and parent and child, but the foundational relationship we'll center our discussion around is between God and humankind.

We'll talk about how Christ forever changed the dynamic of that relationship through his sacrifice on the cross.

We'll also be interacting with thought-provoking data contained in a report produced by Barna Group. If you'd like to dig deeper into anything we discuss today, Barna has produced an in-depth workbook for families to enrich their personal mercy journey. Workbooks are available at [www.barna.com/mercyjourney](http://www.barna.com/mercyjourney).

## Opening questions:

1. On a scale from 1–10 (1 being a low level of mercy, typically unforgiving and unkind; 10 being a high level of mercy, always forgiving and full of grace), how would you rate the level of mercy, forgiveness or kindness you experienced in your home growing up?
2. How did your upbringing impact your current view and practice of mercy, forgiveness or kindness? Is it easy or difficult for you to show mercy to others? What are some examples of that?

## Leader:

As we said the last time we met, we all brought various ideas and presuppositions of mercy into this journey. This is especially true of our experience of mercy within the home. Our past intersects with our present and impacts the future when it comes to our home and family life. But our embrace of the mercy God has lavished on us can transform our current homes when we commit to express it within them.

With that in mind, let's pray and ask God to give us wisdom as we discover how he's called us to express mercy in our homes.

*(Leader prays.)*

## REFLECT & DISCUSS (20 min.)

In *The Mercy Journey* report, Barna tells us that:

- “While believers place few limits on the extravagant forgiveness of the gracious God they serve, there seems to be a mindset that, when it comes to their more personal wounds or conflicts, others have to work a little harder to earn mercy.”
  - \* Do you find this statement to be true for you? How so?
  - \* Why can it be harder to give and receive mercy at home within the context of family?
- 72% of married individuals say forgiveness is about repaired relationships, plain and simple. Those who have never married are 10 percentage points less likely to agree with this statement (62%).
  - \* Why do you think this is? Do you think “repaired relationships” should be the goal or outcome of forgiveness? Why or why not?
  - \* In most of the data, married people and parents generally seem to be more mindful of mercy and motivated to make peace. What is it about that stage / role in life that could possibly contribute to that?



## READ & RESPOND (20 min.)

Let's open and read Ephesians 5:22–6:4.

- What are your first impressions of this passage? What words / phrases / ideas stood out to you?
- If you're honest, what idea / principles / verses do you find yourself naturally and initially resisting?
- What do you think this passage has to do with practicing mercy in our homes?
  - \* For wives?
  - \* For husbands?
  - \* For parents?
  - \* For kids?
  - \* For siblings?
  - \* For roommates?
- For the apostle Paul, it's all about Jesus. When we understand what Jesus did for us, it helps us better understand what he's calling us to do for others.
  - \* We touched on this in our last meeting, but it's worthwhile to discuss again. What might help you grow in your understanding and appreciation of all Jesus did for you?
  - \* How might this gratitude influence your home relationships?
  - \* Perhaps think of one relationship or situation in particular that is causing tension. How would a practice of mercy impact that relationship or situation?
- Let's read the following scriptures in Ephesians aloud:
  - \* 2:8–10
  - \* 3:14
  - \* 4:1–3
  - \* 5:1
  - \* How do these verses frame the passage we just read and discussed in chapter 5?

## APPLY & PRAY (10 min.)

*Let's consider these questions and use them to pray for ourselves and each other as we end our time together today.*

1. *Within my place and role at home, what is God calling me to submit and surrender to him?*
2. *Is there a hard place in my heart that I need to open up and let the mercy of God soften? Is there someone in my family or a circumstance from my past I need to forgive? Is God calling me to grow in humility? To be more kind to those I share my home or routine with?*
3. *Are there relationships or situations you would like the group to pray for? Share to the level you feel comfortable so we as a community can lift you up in prayer.*



# MERCY IN OUR CHURCHES



## INTRODUCTION (10 min.)

Welcome back! Today we're continuing on *The Mercy Journey*, a four-week exploration of mercy in our hearts, our homes, our churches and our communities.

Today we're stepping into what mercy looks like, and what we should aspire for it to look like, within our churches.

As we do, we'll be interacting with thought-provoking research and ideas coming out of a report produced by Barna Group, in partnership with The Reimagine Group. Their discoveries, especially within the context of the Church, can lead us to a greater understanding of mercy and the role it plays within the life of our community.

## Opening questions:

1. Do you think the topic of mercy is addressed often in our church? When it is addressed, what is some typical messaging around it?
2. What do you think it means for a church to be an example of mercy? What might that look like?
3. How would you say our church is doing in the area of mercy? In what ways are we as a community practicing mercy in our relationships with one another? What about in how we serve or relate to people outside our church and in our broader city? When people you know think of our church, are they quick to describe it as merciful, kind and gracious? Why or why not?

## Leader:

Today we're going deeper into God's purpose for the Church. We'll also discover (or rediscover) that the Church should be leading the way, setting the example for the rest of society in being "rich in mercy."

With that in mind, let's pray and ask God to give us wisdom as we discover how mercy can be a defining characteristic of our church.

*(Leader prays.)*

## REFLECT & DISCUSS (20 min.)

In *The Mercy Journey* report, Barna tells us that:

- "Meeting spiritual needs and sharing the gospel top the list of ways Christians and pastors believe the Church, global and local, shows mercy and offers hope."
  - \* Is this true for you and your view of church?
  - \* What are other ways the Church is called to show mercy and offer hope?
- For the most part, attitudes of mercy within the Church closely resemble those in the broader population.
  - \* For instance, practicing Christians don't significantly differ in reporting feelings of high compassion for:
    - those in distress (55% of practicing Christians vs. 52% of the general population),
    - the poor (50% vs. 46%),
    - someone who has wronged them (13% vs. 9%) or
    - someone who has committed a crime (9% vs. 6%).
- "These numbers suggest that attending church and taking one's faith seriously do not necessarily correspond to greater compassion."
  - \* What is your reaction to these findings and conclusions?
  - \* Should our faith in Jesus result in greater compassion? If so, what's holding us back from not expressing it? (Distractions? Emotional callousness? Selfishness? Greed? Other factors?)

## READ & RESPOND (20 min.)

Let's open and read Ephesians 4:1–16.

- From this passage, what would you gather is the purpose of the Church according to Paul? Select a verse and share what it says regarding the Church and its purpose.
- Let's reread verses 4–7. As we do, count how many “ones” Paul uses.
  - \* What is Paul trying to communicate?
  - \* What role does unity play in the Church?
  - \* What's the relationship between unity and mercy?
- Verse 15 tells us we are to “speak the truth in love.”
  - \* What does that mean to you?
  - \* How do you think we are doing as a Church, locally and globally, when it comes to “speaking the truth in love?”
  - \* How can we communicate the absolute truth of God's Word while doing so in love?

## APPLY & PRAY (10 min.)

*Let's consider these questions and use them to pray for ourselves and each other as we end our time together today.*

1. *What divisions need bridging in our church?*
2. *How can our church be a body of mercy and love? What ways have we failed and what do we need to repent of? What ways have we succeeded that we should celebrate?*
3. *Are there any specific projects, people or places within our church's sphere of influence where we could make a tangible difference today if we were to be intentional about showing mercy and compassion? Let's pray for the conviction, boldness and compassion to move toward those places.*

# MERCY IN OUR COMMUNITIES



## INTRODUCTION (10 min.)

Today is our last step together on *The Mercy Journey*. This exploration of mercy in our hearts, homes, churches and communities has challenged our understanding of mercy and motivated us to heed God's call for us—his children—to be people of mercy.

This study is based on research and ideas coming out of a report produced by Barna Group, in partnership with The Reimagine Group. The driving force of this project has been a deep desire that we connect deeply with the truth of God's word, understand and discern the times we live in, and discover how we can experience and extend the mercy of God in rich and impactful ways. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, hopefully this journey will act as a launchpad from which you can carry mercy to our divided and fractured world.

If you want to enrich your journey, a number of additional resources are available for you, including *The Mercy Journey* report, workbooks for business leaders and families and Jack Alexander's book *The God Impulse*. These resources will give you a broader understanding of the state of mercy in our culture and our opportunity as followers of Christ to show true mercy to our world.

## Opening questions:

1. What words or phrases come to mind when you think of the divisions within our society?
2. What contributing factors do you believe have led to those descriptions?

## Leader:

Sometimes it seems we live in especially dark and despairing times. However, we're here today because there is hope! There is good news—we serve a merciful God full of love and compassion. He wants all people to come to repentance, to experience the richness and goodness of his love and mercy. In a dark world, we have the unique opportunity and privilege of holding out the light of Christ for all to see.

That journey begins with you and me allowing God's mercy to penetrate our hearts, transforming us from the inside out, so we can in turn show that same mercy and kindness to a world that desperately needs it.

Let's pray and ask God to work in us and through us as we continue on this mercy journey.

*(Leader prays.)*

## REFLECT & DISCUSS (20 min.)

In *The Mercy Journey* report, Barna challenged people with this scenario:

- “Imagine you meet a young man on the street. His clothes are dirty and rumpled. His hair and beard are scruffy and unkempt. His speech is slightly slurred. He asks you for money. How are you most likely to respond?” When presented with this scenario and asked how they were most likely to respond ...
- 59% said they would begin with praying for this man or providing something other than money, such as a meal (54%).
- 35% would be inclined to directly give money or point the young man to a place that could offer more help (34%). Some believe they would make a more relational gesture, such as asking the man about himself (25%) or perhaps inviting him to join them for a meal (20%).
  - \* How do you think you would have responded to this survey? Why?
  - \* Is there a real-life example when you were confronted with the choice to help someone in need? Describe that situation. How did you respond? How do you wish you would have responded? How did God use that situation to teach you about his desire for mercy?
- “When asked whose responsibility it is to care for those who are in need, less than one in six practicing Christians feels they personally have a primary obligation to help, either in person or by donating money and other resources (17% for each, on average). Rather, the plurality of practicing Christians feels churches or other Christian organizations and nonprofits should shoulder the responsibility to provide for various groups or causes.”
  - \* Do you see expressing mercy to those in need primarily as your responsibility or as the responsibility of “professionals” in nonprofits or other organizations? What leads you to believe this?

## READ & RESPOND (20 min.)

Let's open and read Ephesians 4:25–32 (NIV).

- Paul says in verse 25 to “put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbor.”
  - \* What kind of falsehoods do you think people are tempted to speak to their neighbors? When have you found yourself presenting a “falsehood” to those around you?
  - \* How might these falsehoods be contributing to the divisions we feel in society?
  - \* How are we instructed to treat one another as neighbors, members of one body, in verses 26-29?
- Verse 29 says to “not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.”
  - \* How can our words be used to demonstrate mercy? In other words, what does it mean to “build others up according to their needs?”
  - \* How can you speak in a way that is a benefit to those who listen to you?
- Verse 31 says “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice.”
  - \* How can choosing mercy help us get rid of bitterness and anger?
- Verse 32 says to “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”
  - \* In what ways can we show kindness and compassion to one another? To those in our community?
  - \* When you consider what Christ did in forgiving you, how does that change how you treat others?

## APPLY & PRAY (10 min.)

*Let's consider these questions and use them to pray for ourselves and each other as we end our time together today.*

1. *What truth is God calling me to speak to my neighbor (my literal neighbor perhaps, but anyone who God has put in my path)? How can I speak truth with mercy and compassion so when they hear / see me, they hear / see the mercy and love of Jesus?*
2. *When I pass by people in need, how do I respond? Do I respond at all or have I become numb to the needs of people in my community? How can I become more aware and increase my capacity for mercy and compassion?*
3. *In the midst of all the noise of anger, hatred, impatience and intolerance, how can I be the salt and light of mercy where I work? In my home? In my community? On social media?*
4. *What's one thing I can do this week to demonstrate mercy to another? Can I join or participate in a service project to meet needs in my community?*