**Mercy Journey Sermon Outlines**

**INTRODUCTION**

Pastors,

Thank you for committing to lead your church through *The Mercy Journey*. It is our prayer that this four-week sermon series will propel your community into deep and meaningful discussions, resulting in heart and life transformation in each of you.

Throughout this series, you’ll be interacting with data and thought-provoking research conducted by Barna Group in partnership with The Reimagine Group. At Barna, we are committed to studying the intersection of faith and culture—and have done so for the past 30 years. Our findings in this particular study are covered more in depth in our full *Mercy Journey* report, which we recommend you read alongside the sermon outlines. Each week, the sermon outline will include some key findings from the study to help guide your exploration. These findings will help you and your church understand current prevailing attitudes and expressions of mercy within American churches and across our country at large.

This sermon outline is intended to give you high-level ideas for approaching each week’s content. You’ll find primary scripture passages for each sermon, data from the Mercy Journey study, prompts for anecdotes or stories and conclusions / applications.

**Mercy Journey Resources**

To further equip you as you lead your church through the Mercy Journey, Barna, in partnership with The Reimagine Group, has produced a comprehensive suite of tools shaped by the insights of ministry experts and practitioners. These include:

* *The Mercy Journey* report containing brand-new Barna data about prevailing attitudes and practices of mercy
* The Mercy Journey sermon development resources, which include additional scripture passages, quotes that help drive home the point for each week, additional story prompts and data for each week (appended at the end of this document)
* The Mercy Journey sermon slides: fully designed and editable PowerPoint slides for your sermon
* The Mercy Journey small group guide to facilitate extended study among your parishioners
* The Mercy Journey youth guide so your students can follow along and participate in the series
* The Mercy Journey workbooks for business leaders and families
* Video interviews with key faith and business leaders around the expression and embrace of mercy

**WEEK 1: Mercy in our Hearts**

**SCRIPTURE: Luke 15:11–32 NLT**

**SET THE VISION FOR THE SERIES:**

Tense. Divided. Broken. Hostile. Vitriolic. Isolated. Anxious. Unjust. Skeptical. These words pop up often as Barna Group gauges atmospheres and attitudes in the U.S.—yes, even in the Church. 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 their homes, workplaces, churches and communities.

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. 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 why we are about to embark on a four-part series centered on mercy. These next four weeks will 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.

**MAIN IDEA:** The journey of mercy—a journey scripture mandates every Christ-follower should take—begins in our hearts. Before we can ever extend mercy, we must acknowledge we are lost, guilty of sin and in desperate need of mercy with no hope of saving ourselves. The good news of the gospel, illustrated perfectly in the parable of the prodigal son, is that a loving Heavenly Father is waiting, with mercy-filled arms extended, for us to come back to him. He lavishes us with mercy and in turn makes us instruments of that mercy to a lost and broken world.

**THREE REALITIES ABOUT GOD’S MERCY:**

**1. We are all lost and in need of mercy.**

* SCRIPTURE: “A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.” (v. 13–16)

**2. We have all sinned and don’t deserve mercy.**

* SCRIPTURE: “When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.”’ So he returned home to his father.” (v. 17–20a)

**3. We have a God who is waiting and willing to give us mercy.**

* SCRIPTURE: “And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him.” (v. 20b)

**THREE RESPONSES TO GOD’S MERCY:**

**1. Admit that you are lost.**

* SCRIPTURE: “I will go home to my father and say, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you.’” (v. 18)
* BARNA STAT: “The percentage of practicing Christians who say they have offered unconditional forgiveness (76%) exceeds the percentage who say they have received it (55%)” (*The Mercy Journey*, 9). We can’t truly offer something that we don’t recognize we’ve received ourselves. Perhaps the key for you to take a step on the mercy journey today is to recognize the depth of forgiveness that God has extended to you.

**2. Repent and come home.**

* SCRIPTURE: “So he returned home to his father.” (v. 20)

**3. Forgive and be merciful to others.**

* SCRIPTURE: “His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.’” (v. 31)
* The father wanted his jealous older son to recognize he already had everything that was being lavished on the younger brother. Because we are recipients of such great mercy, we should delight to lavish it on others.
* The father encourages his oldest son to change his perspective, to see his younger brother not through the eyes of the law, but through the lens of grace. SCRIPTURE: “We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!” (v. 32)

**CONCLUSION / APPLICATION:**

***Of the three responses to God’s mercy, which one is God calling you to take?***

* Do you need to simply admit you are lost and in need of God’s mercy? Perhaps for the first time? Or maybe you’ve wandered away from a faith you once had? Wherever you are on your journey, repent (turn around) and run back home to your Heavenly Father. He’s waiting and willing to accept you and give you a home with him. His arms are open, and you’ll see him running to you as you turn toward him.
* Perhaps God’s calling you to forgive and show mercy to someone in your life? Someone who has wronged a person you love? Someone who has wronged you? Who is God calling you to forgive? It may be a process and it may not happen overnight; it may even require removing yourself from a harmful situation or relationship. But, remember the cross and how much it cost God to extend mercy to us. The cross is evidence of how zealously God desires mercy. Pray for the strength and courage to extend it, for the wisdom to know how to pursue it, and for his power to bring hope, healing and restoration to your situation.
* As a church, is God calling us to repent and commit to be more merciful?

**SERIES: The Mercy Journey**

**WEEK 2: Mercy in our Homes**

**SCRIPTURE: Genesis 45 NLT**

**MAIN IDEA:** Forgiveness can be especially difficult within close relationships—maybe even especially family relationships. The life of Joseph illustrates this. Joseph had every earthly reason to hold a grudge and he eventually had the opportunity to exact revenge, but he chose a different road: the mercy journey. By taking that road, Joseph modeled for us how we can move toward forgiveness, peace and redemption in our relationships.

SUMMARIZE Genesis 37; 39–44, focusing in on Joseph and his brothers, then READ Genesis 45:1–9.

**FOUR KEYS TO JOSEPH’S PATH TOWARD FORGIVENESS**

**1. Joseph expressed his emotions.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Joseph could stand it no longer. There were many people in the room, and he said to his attendants, ‘Out, all of you!’ So he was alone with his brothers when he told them who he was. Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh’s palace.” (v. 1–2)

**2. Joseph revealed the wrong.**

* SCRIPTURE: “‘I am Joseph!’ he said to his brothers. ‘Is my father still alive?’ But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them. ‘Please, come closer,’ he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, ‘I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt.’” (vs. 3–4)
* BARNA STAT: “Just 13 percent of practicing Christians express deep compassion for someone who has personally wronged them, only slightly more than the percentage who feel this level of compassion toward a criminal (9%). It’s possible that the intimacy or immediacy of a personal offense poses a challenge to merciful expressions.” (*The Mercy Journey,* 20)
* Acknowledging and discussing the wrong is one of the most important aspects of forgiveness within families. Conflict avoidance may feel easier but will cause wounds to fester.

**3. Joseph recognized God’s greater purpose.**

* SCRIPTURE: “But don’t be upset, and don’t be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt.” (v. 5–8)

**4. Joseph decided to forgive.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Then Joseph kissed each of his brothers and wept over them, and after that they began talking freely with him.” (v. 15)
* “Joseph moves to each of the brothers, kissing each of them. Only such gestures by Joseph restore to the brothers the capacity for speech. The announcement by the narrator that his brothers talked with and to Joseph is a signal that the breach between the brothers is now in the process of closing. The resurfacing of dialogue between Joseph and his brothers spells the end of alienation.” (Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Commentary of the Old Testament*, *Genesis 18–50*, 581–582)

**CONCLUSION / APPLICATION**

* Who do you need to decide to forgive today? What’s one step you can take in that journey?
* Have you adequately expressed the emotions from the hurt and wrong someone committed against you? Seek out a trusted friend, family member or counselor and work toward sharing your thoughts and feelings in a healthy way.
* Pray today for wisdom to know when and how to both receive or extend forgiveness from or to someone in your life. May the Holy Spirit guide you in that process as you seek reconciliation and wholeness in your life.

**SERIES: The Mercy Journey**

**PART 3: Mercy in our Churches**

**SCRIPTURE: James 1:19–2:13 NLT**

**MAIN IDEA:** “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” James, one of the 12 apostles, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and the half-brother of Jesus, wrote to the church at large in the 1st century, making this proclamation in the middle of his letter. It’s a stamp that signifies a broader theme: Christians—those bearing the name of Christ—should live out what they say they believe. It wasn’t okay to receive the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus without being willing to demonstrate that same forgiveness and mercy to others, no matter what they looked like, how much money they had (or didn’t have), or whether they agreed or disagreed with your position on a given subject.

James calls us all to a higher standard: to be a mercy-filled church that listens well, acts according to what we believe, cares for those in need and loves the way God loves.

**FOUR CHARACTERISTICS OF A MERCY-FILLED CHURCH:**

**1. A mercy-filled church LISTENS well.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. Human anger does not produce the righteousness God desires.” (1:19–20)

**2. A mercy-filled church OBEYS the Word of God.**

* SCRIPTURE: “So get rid of all the filth and evil in your lives, and humbly accept the word God has planted in your hearts, for it has the power to save your souls. But don’t just listen to God’s word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves.” (1:21–22)

**3. A mercy-filled church CARES for the lonely and abandoned.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you.” (1:27)

**4. A mercy-filled church ACTS out their faith through love and service.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Yes indeed, it is good when you obey the royal law as found in the Scriptures: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’… So whatever you say or whatever you do, remember that you will be judged by the law that sets you free. There will be no mercy for those who have not shown mercy to others. But if you have been merciful, God will be merciful when he judges you. What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, ‘Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well’—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.” (2:8, 12–17)

**CONCLUSION / APPLICATION:**

* BARNA STAT / QUOTE: “For the most part, the numbers 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% vs. 52% of 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 professing to follow Jesus do not necessarily correspond to greater compassion. Even with frequent exposure to merciful teachings and consistent encouragement to show mercy, the average church attendee does not appear to express more compassion than the average American.” (*The Mercy Journey,* 28)
* Did you catch that? There’s not that big of a difference between the Church and the broader population when it comes to tangible expressions of compassion and mercy. If the gospel is to take deeper root in our culture and more people are to come to Jesus, we need to change this. But how?
* Well, it all starts with one person committing to take it one day at a time, one person at a time, one situation at a time. As that happens, a Church unites as one body for one great mission to unleash the compassion and mercy of Jesus to a lost and broken world. It all starts with *one*. It starts with you and me.
* This week, what is one act of mercy and kindness you can offer one person that can make a difference in their life? Let that one become another, and then another, and then another. Together, one becomes many and an entire community can be changed because the Church came together to be a beacon of hope and mercy to a lost and broken world.

**SERIES: The Mercy Journey**

**PART 4: Mercy in our Communities**

**SCRIPTURE: Luke 10:25–37 NLT**

**MAIN IDEA:** The Parable of the Good Samaritan, perhaps the most well-known of Jesus’ parables, deals directly with his charge to be merciful to others. He didn’t extend mercy just to the religious elite or pious few. In fact, Jesus reserved some of his harshest words for the Pharisees, who, in their self-righteousness, didn’t recognize their need for mercy. Jesus’ mercy is for the bruised and broken, for the outcast and shunned, for the Jew and for the Samaritan. Through this parable, Jesus pointed out that he came for the unlikely as he used the unlikely to demonstrate what real mercy, grace and love is all about.

**WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?**

The man on the side of the road represents our neighbor. A closer look at his situation helps us understand what “neighbors” we are called to love today.

1. ***The hurting and the helpless***—he was robbed, attacked and beaten (v. 30).
2. ***The ignored and forgotten***—he was left for dead; many who could have helped passed him by (v. 30–32).
3. ***The least likely***—with their differences in class, religion and race, he was the least likely person a Samaritan would have helped (v. 33)

**FOUR WAYS THE SAMARITAN DEMONSTRATED MERCY:**

**1. He saw him and had COMPASSION.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Then a despised Samaritan came along, and when he saw the man, ***he felt compassion for him***.” (v. 33)

**2. He went to him and took CARE of his needs.**

* SCRIPTURE: “Going over to him, the Samaritan soothed his wounds with olive oil and wine and bandaged them. Then he put the man on his own donkey and took him to an inn, where he took care of him.” (vs. 34)

**3. He counted the COST and paid it.**

* SCRIPTURE: “The next day he handed the innkeeper two silver coins, telling him, ‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, I’ll pay you the next time I’m here.’” (vs. 35)

**4. He showed a COMMITMENT to the man’s *complete* healing.**

* SCRIPTURE: “‘Take care of this man. If his bill runs higher than this, ***I’ll pay you the next time I’m here***.’” (v. 35b)

**CONCLUSION / APPLICATION:**

Jesus told us to not just identify with the Good Samaritan’s act of mercy, but to imitate it: “Now go and do the same.” (v. 37)

So where do we go from here? What do we need to do or change so we can commit fully to bringing mercy, love and kindness to our communities?

* Let’s PRAY—that we would ***see*** the hurting, the broken, the lonely and the lost the same way the Samaritan saw the man on the side of the road. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes to opportunities to be an instrument of mercy.
* Let’s INVEST—the Good Samaritan allocated his resources so that he had margin to care for those in need. Let’s prioritize generosity toward others as a way to honor God with our resources and be living expressions of his mercy.
* Let’s ACT—we should not only see people in need of mercy, but stop what we’re doing and ***care*** for those who need care. (Pastor—here’s a chance to issue a specific challenge to show mercy. Perhaps it’s an individual challenge to demonstrate a certain number of mercy acts in the coming week. It could also be a great time to launch a mercy initiative as a church.)

**Mercy Journey Sermon Development Resources**

Thank you for shepherding and leading your congregation through *The Mercy Journey*. We pray this series moves your congregation to a true embrace of Christlike compassion that will lead to tangible expressions of mercy and justice in your community, city and beyond. As you lead, we pray the whole gospel is preached and practiced, Jesus Christ is glorified, and many come to know him as the merciful, loving God he is.

The sermon development resources contained here are not intended as “plug-and-play” elements. Rather, they offer a framework from which you can build sermons and worship experiences that fit your congregation. In addition to outlines for this four-week series, we’ve compiled statistics taken directly from *The Mercy Journey* report, quotes from relevant works of respected pastors and authors, illustration ideas, and additional scripture references to mercy, compassion and forgiveness. May they serve to enrich your sermon preparation and be useful tools as you rely on the Holy Spirit’s direction and leading to teach God’s Word.

**Questions to Consider:**

The following questions are intended first for your personal reflection, but with modification could serve as thought-provoking, action-evoking questions for the congregation.

1. When is the last time I reflected on the simple yet profound love and mercy of God as it’s been expressed in my own life? Is God wanting to do a deeper work of mercy in me so it can overflow into my leadership of others?
2. Am I personally struggling with forgiveness? Is there a person in my life or a situation in my past that I’m unwilling to forgive? How is that impacting the way I lead and shepherd the flock? To lead others on this mercy journey, do I first need to pursue my own healing and wholeness?
3. What is God calling our church to celebrate in the areas of compassion, mercy and justice? What are we doing as individuals or as a body that we can openly share to highlight what God is already doing in our midst?
4. Do we need to be honest as leaders and as a church about any core teachings from the gospel that we’ve neglected? Do we need to openly lead our congregations to confess this, repent of it and renew our commitment to “desire mercy over sacrifice” and live out the whole gospel in our everyday lives and communities? How can we do this in a convicting yet edifying and encouraging way?
5. Am I (and are we as a church) prepared to minister to people who carry substantial burdens and pain due to past wrongdoing, hurts or even abuse? How can we provide biblical support for people who have been abused and neglected? Are we well networked to provide recommendations to professional counselors, therapists or support groups if needed?
6. Is the Mercy Journey an opportunity to partner with other local churches to have a greater impact on our community and city? How can we unite and come together? Are there existing relationships I have with other pastors that can be leveraged toward a mercy journey movement in our community and city?

**Stats and Quotes from *The Mercy Journey* Report**

**WEEK 1: MERCY IN OUR HEARTS**

“If I see mercy as a deed, it is easy for me to check it off my list or even outsource it to another party, like I would for landscaping, tax preparation or automotive repairs. Has the same spirit of outsourcing crept into our displays of compassion?” (from the preface by Jack Alexander, p. 5)

“The percentage of practicing Christians who say they have offered unconditional forgiveness (76%) exceeds the percentage who say they have received it (55%).” (p. 9)

“Around one in four practicing Christians (23%) has a person in their life who they ‘just can’t forgive.’” (p. 9)

“It’s encouraging to know that a majority of practicing Christians (76%) believes they have offered unconditional, joyful forgiveness to another person who had hurt, upset or sinned against them (or someone they love). Nearly one in six (15%) says they have never offered this level of forgiveness, and 9 percent admit they are unsure.

Reports of receiving such radical forgiveness, however, are a bit more modest. Just over half of practicing Christians (55%) remembers a person being merciful to them in this way, with another 38 percent who say this has not happened and 7 percent who don’t know. This stark disparity makes one wonder if the *perceptions* of giving versus receiving unconditional forgiveness vary dramatically; while many may perceive that they have extended unconditional forgiveness, the recipient of that forgiveness may not feel the same way.” (p. 12)

“When it comes to accepting forgiveness for oneself, not all Christians find themselves ready or capable of doing so. More than one-fifth of practicing Christians (22%) reports struggling with receiving forgiveness for something they have personally done.” (p. 13)

“Similarly, this study suggests that those who experience radical forgiveness have more willingness to forgive others. Among those who say they have received forgiveness, almost nine in 10 (87%) say they have given it in return (compared to 64 percent of those who have not received it).” (p. 13)

“Millennials are five times more likely than Elders to say there is something for which they have a hard time being forgiven.” (p. 16)

**WEEK 2: MERCY IN OUR HOMES**

“Just 13 percent of practicing Christians express deep compassion for someone who has personally wronged them, only slightly more than the percentage who feel this level of compassion toward a criminal (9%). It’s possible that the intimacy or immediacy of a personal offense poses a challenge to merciful expressions.” (p. 20)

“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.” (p. 20)

“Married individuals are significantly more likely than others to prioritize peacemaking.” (p. 22)

“A marriage partnership presents daily opportunities to either delight or offend someone who is very invested in your thoughts and behavior. Thus, married couples likely are well rehearsed in needing forgiveness too. When asked if there was something for which a person had yet to accept forgiveness, 19 percent of married practicing Christians say yes, compared to 30 percent of people who have never been married.” (p. 23)

**WEEK 3: MERCY IN OUR CHURCHES**

“A majority of pastors (68%) believes teaching on mercy directly in sermons is the most effective way to inspire someone to learn about God, even more so than other topics like truth (28%) or justice (4%).” (p. 26)

“For the most part, the numbers 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% vs. 52% of 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%). Those numbers suggest that attending church and taking one’s faith seriously do not necessarily correspond to greater compassion. Even with frequent exposure to teachings on mercy and consistent encouragement to show mercy, the average church attendee is only slightly more likely to express compassion than the average American.” (p. 28)

**WEEK 4: MERCY IN OUR COMMUNITIES**

“One finding of this study is that experiences with or even simply proximity to hardship correlates with more forgiving and merciful attitudes.” (p. 32)

“Seven in 10 practicing Christians (69%) say they have experienced something emotionally painful and were later inspired to support people facing similar circumstances.” (p. 36)

“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 that churches and other Christian organizations and nonprofits should shoulder the responsibility to provide for various groups or causes.” (p. 37)

“The purpose of the gospel is restoring creation, taking the things that are falling apart and bringing them back together. Meeting psychological, social and physical needs. You’re not saved *by* doing that, but you are saved *to* do that. Without the business of restoration, you’re just waiting for heaven, and that’s a very reductionistic understanding of the Christian life”–Timothy Keller (p. 42)

“As pastors and church leaders, we must see truth and mercy as interdependent.”–Timothy Keller (p. 42)

“Mercy depicts truth. If people see us using mercy sacrificially—investing our time, our money, our lives in our neighbors—they will listen and find hope and healing.”–Timothy Keller (p. 43)

**Quotes from other published works:**

**WEEK 1: MERCY IN OUR HEARTS**

“Imagine for a moment that God’s a father, waiting for a kid who missed his curfew. When the child finally comes home, what does mercy look like in that moment? Some might imagine God with his arms crossed and a scowl on his face. ‘Oh, it’s all right,’ he’d say, looking at the child’s crestfallen face. ‘Go on up to bed.’ But in my understanding of mercy—the biblical understanding, I believe—God doesn’t just tap his foot. He rushes to the door and embraces the boy, asking him if he’s scared or hurt or if something happened. He wants to wrap us in his arms and know the story behind that missed curfew. He’s not concerned about the broken law as much as he’s concerned about us. And that is a beautiful thing.” (Jack Alexander, *The God Impulse*, 36)

“If you’re not willing to make loving God and loving people your highest priority, then stop. Seriously, walk away until you’ve settled this one essential point. Lack of love is the unmistakable mark of death: ‘We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death’ (1 John 3:14).” (Francis Chan, *Multiply*, 44)

“Through this parable Jesus challenges what nearly everyone has ever thought about God, sin and salvation. His story reveals the destructive self-centeredness of the younger brother, but it also condemns the elder brother’s moralistic life in the strongest terms. Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends, and that every thought the human race has had about how to connect to God has been wrong.” (Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal Son*, 10–11)

“One of the great healing balms of the Holy Spirit is forgiveness. To forgive is to break the link between you and your past. Sadly enough, many times the person hardest to forgive is the one in the mirror. Although they rage loudly about others, people secretly blame themselves for failed relationships. Regardless of whom you hold responsible, there is no healing in blame. When you realize that your past does not necessarily dictate the outcome of your future, then you can release the hurt. It is impossible to inhale new air until you exhale the old.” (T.D. Jakes, *Healing the Wounds of the Past*, 15–16)

“Out of my pain, I see others’ pain, and because I have tasted freedom I crave others’ freedom … Out of your pain, we heal. Out of our bondage, we set free.” (Jennie Allen, *Restless*, 116)

“It’s remarkable that the father never mentions the older son’s years of service, just as he never speaks of the younger son’s rebelliousness when he returned home. Instead, the father’s focus is all about having his son with him. While the sons were fixated on the father’s wealth, the father was fixated on his children. This is what they both failed to understand, and it is what both Christian consumerism and Christian missionalism fail to see. God’s gifts are a blessing and His work is vital, but neither can nor should replace God Himself as our first calling.” (Skye Jethani, *Immeasurable*, 195)

“But the great thing to remember is that, though our feelings come and go, his love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins, or our indifference; and therefore, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to him.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 102–103)

“What I’ve learned in my own grace story is that losing everything is the entry fee for the prodigal party that God invites us to. Tickets can be picked up only in the valley of death. You can’t find them anywhere else. Trust me, I looked. StubHub. eBay. Willy Wonka chocolate bars. Amazon. Church. The tickets aren’t there. We find them only in the blackest, deepest brokenness of our pain and loss.” (Mike Foster, *People of the Second Chance*, 34)

“The deeper call for courage comes when you let go with nothing ahead to grab.” (Annie F. Downs, *Let’s All Be Brave*, 128)

**WEEK2: MERCY IN OUR HOMES**

“When we accept all our emotions, we protect ourselves from needless inner conflict between what we are truly feeling and the voices telling us that we shouldn’t feel those things. When we accept all our emotions, it is the beginning of making peace with ourselves.” (Geri Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Woman*, 104)

“I’ve been asking God to help me figure out who I really am and who He really is. Here’s the thing: Jesus is the only one who can let us know the truth about ourselves and the truth about who He is. Most of us have all the knowledge we need. People don’t need information; they want examples. God wants to use people like us to show the world what we know about Jesus by having them see the way we love the people around us. Particularly the difficult ones.” (Bob Goff, *Everybody Always*, 111)

“What men meant for evil, God meant for good, for the saving of many lives. Fires are lit in our lives, and they can burn to shine light or cause destruction. We get to decide which purpose we will serve.” (Jennie Allen, *Restless*, 117)

“Unforgiveness is a strategic ‘design,’ craftily implemented by your Enemy to ‘outwit’ you, to cripple your effectiveness in prayer and your power to stand against him victoriously. Which is why, if I were your Enemy, I would do everything possible to keep you from forgiving anyone and everyone who’s done you any wrong.” (Priscilla Shirer, *Fervent*, 153)

“A fatherless generation looks for brothers and sisters who are able to take away their fear and anxiety, who can open the doors of their narrow-mindedness and show them that forgiveness is a possibility that dawns on the horizon of humanity. The compassionate person who points to the possibility of forgiveness helps others to free themselves from the chains of their restrictive shame, allows them to experience their own guilt, and restores their hope for a future in which the lamb and the lion can lie down together.” (Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 46)

“In my own family sibling squabbles have spilled into intergenerational alienations. When adult siblings refuse to speak to each other because of some offense, recent or long past, their children and grandchildren can lose out on the joy of strong family relationships. The children and grandchildren may never know what occasioned the freeze. They know only that ‘We don’t visit this aunt’ or ‘We don’t really know those cousins.’ Forgiveness among the members of older generations could open the door to healthy and supportive relationships among younger generations.” (Desmond Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, 19–20)

“We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness, and affection.

Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them—we can only love others as much as we love ourselves. Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed, and rare.” (Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly*, 105–106)

“If you find yourself blaming others and feeling like a victim, it is time to ask an important question: ‘What am I going to do about it?’ Asking yourself this question shifts the focus from blaming others to taking personal responsibility for your life.” (Geri Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Woman*, 118)

“Let’s face it—living in accordance with the Word of God is not the default position for most Christians. It is much easier to drift along in the milieu of mediocrity than it is to swim upstream. In fact, after a while the norm changes, and we become less passionate (some would say fanatical) again. However, if we are to experience multigenerational faithfulness we must come to a place where we throw off the shackles of our culture and live in the fullness that is found only in Christ. We must be people who live the Word in our homes.” (Voddie Baucham Jr., *Family Driven Faith*, 114)

**WEEK 3: MERCY IN OUR CHURCHES**

“When we get beyond ourselves and think of the gospel, when we remember the new life that we’ve received, we know we’re called to bring his influence in the situation we face every day. We’re called to serve, to love, to hold, to pioneer and speak out, to work and build families and communities in the name of Jesus. We’re commissioned to respond in some way, to be someone who will do something. To live influential lives in every way, including as leaders. We can’t ignore the power of the gospel we’ve received to transform the needs of the world around us. We just need to work out where to begin, and how to get ourselves ready to respond to God in our lives.” (Jo Saxton, *More Than Enchanting*, 23)

“Those of us who have enough must learn the art and the heart of giving if we are to be true worshipers. Spending more and more on ourselves and giving less and less to the world in need may be the very reason few take our mission seriously.” (Ravi Zacharias, *The Grand Weaver*, 149)

“When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our brotherly love, the less were we living by God’s mercy and love. Thus God himself taught us to meet one another as God has met us in Christ. ‘Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God’ (Rom. 15:7, KJV).” (Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, *Devotional Classics*, 274)

“Among those who seek to follow Christ, it is generally understood that in order for reconciliation to occur, there must be repentance, justice and forgiveness. A wrong must be acknowledged and the cause for the lack of unity identified. There is no sustained peace without justice and no sustained relationship without forgiveness. These are crucial in this conversation, yes, but I do not believe that justice and forgiveness alone are enough to produce reconciliation. As with the phrases *intercultural competence* and *intercultural integrity*, something central is still lacking because the church is called to go beyond even this. We are called to go beyond simply making peace or getting enemies to stop fighting—beyond repentance, justice and forgiveness. The Bible invites us further.” (Brenda Salter McNeil, *Roadmap to Reconciliation: Moving Communities in Unity, Wholeness and Justice*, 21)

“In order to gain trust and credibility with those who are skeptical, and to demonstrate our love for them, good faith Christians need to learn how to listen well. Good conversations don’t begin with proclamations but rather by meeting people right where they are.” (David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith*, 82)

“Jesus reminds us that showing mercy is not just for those in our circle, but for those who never assume they could be part of it. So Jesus widened the circle.” (Rusty George, *Justice. Mercy. Humility*, 142)

“I believe that true listening wars against the entrenched selfishness of the human heart. The listening heart is one that seeks to give, to learn, to welcome, to serve. In a small but real way, listening imitates the self-emptying act of Jesus, who voluntarily released his claims on ruling in order to serve and give his life.” (Adam McHugh, *The Listening Life*, 137)

**WEEK 4: MERCY IN OUR COMMUNITIES**

“Food, shelter, clothing, yes. But what if the greatest resource we can provide costs us nothing but our time? And what if the gift of a listening ear is more valuable to someone than a twenty-dollar bill?” (Rusty George, *Justice. Mercy. Humility*, 101)

“The question, now as then, is whether we will use all that Jesus is telling us here about love and grace as a call to extend that love and grace to the whole world. No church, no Christian can remain content with living life in a way that allows us to watch most of the world lying half-dead in the road and pass by.” (N.T. Wright, *Lent For Everyone: Luke*, 47).

“Could we try to be more like Jesus, this perfect man who was never too busy to notice someone who needed his touch? Sure, we also have many things calling for our attention. Crowds of people and projects press in. Whether at work or at home, we are often on our way to do something grand. But Jesus is calling us to stop and notice. To live alert. To give a special touch that may heal a heart or cheer a weary soul.” (Karen Ehman, *Listen, Love, Repeat: Other-Centered Living in a Self-Centered World*, 21)

“So as we come alongside the broken, hurting people God has placed in our lives, let’s remember where our power comes from. These are not mere physical issues that we can correct through hard work. These are spiritual issues that run deeper than we can imagine. Yet God has supplied us with everything we need in order to fulfill his calling. The power to transform hearts and change lives comes from the Holy Spirit (John 6:63), through the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16–17), and through prayers (James 5:16–20).” (Francis Chan, *Multiply*, 60)

“If we're waiting for the needy to walk through our church doors, we may wait a long time. God doesn't wait for people to come to him. He goes to them and desires to intervene right at the point of their need. He's looking for a few brave people, like the apostle Paul, who are willing to go rather than wait for them to come. He's not looking for show-offs. He's looking for people through whom he can show off his Son. May we be some of those people. (Beth Moore, *To Live Is Christ*, 152)

“My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.” (Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 18)

“‘The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also’ (Leviticus 4:21, NRSV). Every sentence in this elaborate pastoral exposition of the five-word command in Leviticus comes out more or less the same: God loves you. Christ shows you how love works. Now you love. Love, love, love, love. Just do it.” (Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 41)

“We live in a world and culture in which—both out of privilege and conviction—many people want to make an impact. This is good. In fact, this is *really* good. This desire needs to be affirmed, nurtured, and cultivated. However, let’s be honest with ourselves. We all love justice and compassion. Seriously, who doesn’t? But is it possible we are more in love with the *idea* of compassion and justice than we are with actually putting it into practice? Is it possible that we all love compassion and justice … *until there’s a personal cost* to living compassionately, loving mercy, and seeking justice?” (Eugene Cho, *Overrated*, 16–17)

“The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.” (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 101)

“Here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy's point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. For from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.” (Martin Luther King Jr., *Beyond Vietnam: A Time To Break Silence*, April 4, 1967)

“’Love your neighbor as yourself’ is a command that reaches out beyond the circle of friends and fellow Christians we meet on a regular basis. It is a call to show mercy to all the unfortunate people lying beside the Jericho road of human life. And it is a cry to affluent nations to alleviate the suffering and poverty countless people experience in underdeveloped countries.” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables*, 147)

“The parable of the Good Samaritan is timeless. Substitute today’s occupations, nationalities, and races and nothing has changed since the day Jesus taught the parable. Therefore, the parable is not a story of someone who did a good deed as if he were a member of the Boy Scouts. It is an indictment against anyone who has raised protective barriers in order to live a sheltered life.” (Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables*. 146–147)

“The logic is clear. If a person has grasped the meaning of God’s grace in his heart, he will do justice. If he doesn’t live justly, then he may say with his lips that he is grateful for God’s grace, but in his heart he is far from him. If he doesn’t care about the poor, it reveals that at best he doesn’t understand the grace he has experienced, and at worst he has not really encountered the saving mercy of God.” (Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice*, 93–94)

“Find a way to love difficult people more, and you’ll be living the life Jesus talked about. Go find someone you’ve been avoiding and give away extravagant love to them. You’ll learn more about God, your neighbor, your enemies and your faith. Find someone you think is wrong, someone you disagree with, someone who isn’t like you at all, and decide to love that person the way you want Jesus to love you.” (Bob Goff, *Everybody Always*, 8–9)

“We must start to listen—yes, because it’s the right thing to do but more importantly because God handcrafts human beings of every hue in his own image to act as stewards over creation. And our society’s unholy habits of injustice and inequality degrade and disempower God’s image-bearers.” (David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Good Faith*, 158)

**Illustration Prompts:**

***Personal***

* Share personal stories of mercy, compassion and forgiveness from your own life. Perhaps make it a goal to share at least one of these stories every week. Some of the greatest impact you’ll make in your preaching comes when people see mercy is a reality lived out in your own life.
  + Heart–your own story of conversion, a specific time you were forgiven or extended forgiveness, or a moment you related to either brother in the story of the Prodigal Son.
  + Home–a time you had to forgive someone close to you, ways you’ve intentionally fostered mercy and compassion in your own home, stories of your childhood (positive or negative) that taught you about God’s mercy.
  + Church–how you have been personally impacted by stories of mercy within your church; share negative church experiences in your past where mercy and compassion were not on display.
  + Community–ways you have intentionally shown mercy to the community you live in; specific stories of gospel impact within your community; ways you wished you would have been more intentional in the past (perhaps a specific story when you “missed the point”) and what you learned from it.

***Church***

* Share individual stories of mercy, compassion and forgiveness from your congregation.
  + Gospel conversions–tell the simple stories of how the gospel has changed people’s lives. Highlight the “lost and found” theme found in Luke 15.
  + Restoration stories–share instances where forgiveness was extended, relationships were reconciled and hope was restored.
  + Faith in Action–highlight people who are putting their faith in action where they live, work, study or play. Is there someone who started a nonprofit to serve children in group homes or the foster care system? Did someone adopt a child in need? Is there someone who organized a community yard sale to benefit a neighbor with cancer? Are members of the congregation involved in prison ministry? The stories are there. Find them, tell them, celebrate them and invite others in!

***Community / Global***

* Share community and global stories of how gospel mercy and justice is having an impact.
  + Local and global missions–stories from missionaries or organizations your church supports or partners with.
  + Local news stories–current and relevant stories from the news that highlight social justice, acts of mercy and kindness or the need for such action that the church could fulfill.

**Additional Scripture References (NLT):**

“Forgive your people who have sinned against you. Forgive all the offenses they have committed against you. Make their captors merciful to them,” 1 Kings 8:50

“For God said to Moses, ‘I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose.’” Romans 9:15

“Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” Colossians 3:12

“This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies says: ‘Judge fairly, and show mercy and kindness to one another.’” Zechariah 7:9

“But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness.” 1 John 1:9

“No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” Micah 6:8

“All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else. But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!).” Ephesians 2:3-5

“But when you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.” Mark 11:25

“So if you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.” Matthew 5:23–24

“Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.” Romans 12:18

“Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love. Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.” Psalm 51:1

“Now go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: ‘I want you to show mercy, not offer sacrifices.’ For I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners.” Matthew 9:13