

MERCIFUL

CHECKLIST: WHAT YOU NEED

- Clock or watch with second hand for timing
- Copies of the downloadable “Litany” and “Prayers & Thanksgivings” booklets
- Copies of the lesson handout
- Copy of the leader’s notes
- OPTIONAL: Bibles (ESV or similar recommended)
- OPTIONAL: A white board, easel pad, or chalk board with markers/chalk
- OPTIONAL: Have notebooks on hand for teens to take home and use as prayer journals if they wish

ICE BREAKER: SWAPPING PLACES

Ahead of time set up a “stage” area with two chairs for performers. Ask the teens to list together scene ideas involving two people, where one must ask for forgiveness from the other. *For example: a store employee spills a fizzy drink on the manager’s computer, or a mother breaks a child’s favourite toy.* Two at a time the teens take the stage and are assigned a scenario (if the numbers are odd, then a leader can participate). Pairs have one full minute to perform their scene: this means they have to try to add a little bit of substance to the dialogue while still keeping it brief. At the 30-second point in their scene, the timer says “switch” and the actors must switch roles and continue to perform their scene to the one-minute mark. Feel free to alter the time markers as works best for your group.

FOR SMALLER GROUPS, YOU MAY WANT TO TAKE MULTIPLE TURNS OR GIVE A LONGER TIME ALLOWANCE FOR EACH SCENE. FOR LARGER GROUPS, YOU MAY WANT TO MODIFY THE SCENARIOS TO ALLOW FOR FOUR PERFORMERS UP AT A TIME (FOR EXAMPLE, TWO STORE EMPLOYEES AND TWO MANAGERS OR TWO PARENTS AND TWO CHILDREN ARE INVOLVED IN THE INTERVIEW).

THE LITANY: BEGINNING WITH PRAYER

Begin the formal part of the lesson by saying together the Litany, leaving off the Grace (which can be said at the close of the lesson).

AT THIS POINT IN THE LESSON, ASK IF THE TEENS SUCCEEDED IN DOING LAST WEEK’S CHALLENGE, HOW IT WENT, AND WHETHER THEY HAVE ANYTHING TO SHARE.

DISCUSSION: ASKING FOR FORGIVENESS

As an introduction to the lesson ask the teens to discuss the following questions.

DEPENDING ON THE COMFORT LEVEL FOR SHARING IN YOUR GROUP, IT MAY BE EASIER TO HAVE THEM VOLUNTEER ANSWERS WITH ALL RESPONSES WRITTEN TOGETHER ON A BOARD.

- Think of a time when you had to ask someone for forgiveness. How did you feel about it? What happened?
- How about a time when someone came to you and asked for your forgiveness? Did you want to forgive them? What happened?

A few things worth pointing out (if they don’t otherwise arise during the discussion):

- *Asking for forgiveness is hard. It puts us in a position of vulnerability because we have to admit that we’ve done something that requires forgiveness. When we go to someone to ask for forgiveness, we don’t know how they will respond, so we often feel anxiety. For example, if I break one of my mother’s favourite vases and go to tell her so, I know that she is going to be angry, she may want me to replace to vase or simply to be more careful in future, but hopefully she will forgive me.*
- *Being asked for forgiveness can be just as challenging. If we are being asked for forgiveness it means that someone has wronged us in some way and it can be hard to let go of our anger, to let go of the desire to retaliate in some*

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way. But forgiveness is a two-way street. Think of the Lord's Prayer, which ties together for us the Lord's forgiveness of our sins and our forgiveness of those who sin against us!

THE LESSON: JONAH 3-4

The first part of the lesson (below) can be read aloud. Then the teens are asked to read the Bible text (either silently to themselves or aloud together), followed by some additional questions for discussion.

The opening petitions of the Litany (sometimes referred to as “the invocations”, meaning “callings”) repeat the phrase “Have mercy upon us”. Why is this? In brief, it is because we *need* mercy, but it is also because it’s in God’s very character to *be* merciful.

Mercy is all about compassion and forgiveness. When we ask God for mercy, we are recognizing that we are sinful and part of a sinful world, and that God would be justified in leaving us to the consequences of that sin: Yikes! So praying to God for mercy is first of all an acknowledgment that we need his compassion and forgiveness.

This appeal to God for mercy is one that pops up again and again in scripture, especially in the psalms and in the Gospels. Consider King David’s words: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (Psalm 51:1). Or consider the two blind men who called out to Jesus, saying, “Have mercy on us, Son of David” (Matthew 9:27). As it happens, King David was forgiven, and the two blind men were healed. These passages and so many like them tell us that our petitions do not fall on deaf ears.

Our God is a merciful God. When we ask for God’s mercy, we are appealing to his very character. The psalms say, “You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (86:15). St. John’s first epistle says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:9).

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We’re going to take a look at a passage from the short Old Testament book of Jonah. Here’s the scoop: Jonah was a prophet in Israel. That means it was his job to take God’s message wherever God sent him. But God decided to send Jonah to the foreign city of Nineveh, a place notorious for evil, and Jonah didn’t want to go. After some creative convincing, Jonah did go and do what God commanded. Check out what happened next.

Refer to Jonah 3:1 - 4:4, 11.

(VERSES HAVE BEEN CLIPPED FROM THE READING FOR THE SAKE OF BREVITY AND FOCUS, BUT IF YOU HAVE TIME TO EXPLORE THE PASSAGE FULLY, FEEL FREE TO READ IT IN ITS ENTIRETY: JONAH 3-4.)

(THE TEXT IS PROVIDED ON THE BACK OF THE HANDOUTS AND IN THESE LEADERS’ NOTES SO THAT EVERYONE CAN MARK IT UP AND MAKE NOTES ON IT IF DESIRED. ALTERNATIVELY, YOU CAN READ OUT OF A BIBLE).

Read through the text. Then ask the teens to respond to what they’ve just read. Here are some questions to help guide the discussion.

- What do we know about the people of Nineveh? How did Jonah feel about the people of Nineveh? How did God feel about the people of Nineveh?
- How would you describe God’s response to Jonah? What does this story tell us about what God is like?
- Do you relate more to the people of Nineveh or to Jonah in this story? Are there people that you don’t want God to be merciful towards? What can we do if we find we have Jonah’s heart (instead of God’s heart) towards a group or a person?

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A few notes and reflections for reference:

- We don't get a lot of details on what specific evils were going on, but the king of Nineveh speaks of "evil ways" and "violent hands" (3:8). However, when Jonah preaches against them, these people respond with repentance. They believe what he is saying, they call to God for mercy and they change their ways! God, in his description of the people says that they "do not know their right hand from their left", suggesting that their sin was at least in part due to their ignorance, but they were ready to receive correction.
- Jonah hated those people! They were ancient enemies of Israel. He wanted God's judgment to fall upon them. He did not want them to have an opportunity to repent and receive God's mercy.
- God was angry with the evil that was taking place in Nineveh. Yet God cared about these people. He wanted them to have an opportunity to repent so that he could show compassion and spare them!
- God not only had to deal with Nineveh, he also had to deal with a disobedient and sulky prophet. In the excerpts we're looking at today we're missing some of the pieces that might help to explain this, but God's patience and willingness to teach Jonah are amazing. Jonah is in some ways even more in need of God's mercy than the Ninevites. Jonah knows God, he has that advantage, but he still disobeys by refusing to go where he's been told, and then when he obeys and God has shown mercy, Jonah is angry. But God doesn't give up on Jonah. He takes the time and explains to Jonah that the Ninevites are valuable to him.
- God is holy and just. There were consequences for Nineveh that were only averted because the people repented! God is merciful. Even Nineveh was eligible to receive God's mercy! God is patient, forgiving and a good teacher. Jonah was not an ideal servant! Yet, God chose to work with him, to be patient and forgiving and to teach him. He did not leave Jonah where he found him.
- We might read this story and identify with the Ninevites, thinking of our own sins that we wish for God to have mercy on. But we might also be tempted to feel indignant like Jonah about those people we think do not deserve God's mercy. Most of us can think of people that we feel have caused too much hurt to deserve any mercy, but Jonah's story reminds us that God's mercy is available to all, and that we ourselves stand in need of it. If we find ourselves with a "Jonah-heart" we can pray for our own Ninevites and ask God to give us a heart like his towards them.

DURING EACH LESSON, IF THE TEENS RAISE THEOLOGICAL OR BIBLICAL QUESTIONS THAT YOU DON'T FEEL CONFIDENT ABOUT ANSWERING, SAY SO, BUT LET THEM KNOW THAT YOU'LL FIND THE ANSWER AND RESPOND AT THE NEXT MEETING.

PREVIEW: AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Take a brief moment to look at the at-home challenge together.

THE WEEKLY "AT-HOME CHALLENGE" IS TYPICALLY A SIMPLE ASSIGNMENT TO SPEND SOME QUIET TIME IN PRIVATE PRAYER. ENCOURAGE THE TEENS TO GET NOTEBOOKS THAT CAN BE USED AS PRAYER JOURNALS. ASSURE THEM THAT THEY WILL NOT BE REQUIRED TO SHOW THEIR JOURNAL OR THEIR PRIVATE PRAYERS TO ANYONE.

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://prayerbook.ca/resources/bcponline/family-prayer))

Spend some time considering your own need for God's compassion and forgiveness and slowly repeat the words, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner". Next, sit in silence, recalling to mind that our God is a merciful God. Read aloud the words of 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness". Finally, identify those people that you struggle to feel compassion for, and ask God to help you to have a heart like his towards them, one that desires their repentance and God's mercy.

- AND/OR -

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Take some time to pray through this collect.

O God, who declarest thy almighty power most chiefly in showing mercy and pity: Mercifully grant unto us such a measure of thy grace, that we, running the way of thy commandments, may obtain thy gracious promises, and be made partakers of thy heavenly treasure; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(THE COLLECT FOR THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY, BCP PAGE 234)

CLOSING PRAYERS

Close with any prayers that might be appropriate in the context of the discussion of the day.

AT THE END OF EACH LESSON, IF YOU FIND THAT YOU STILL HAVE LOTS OF TIME REMAINING, YOU MIGHT CHOOSE TO TAKE SOME TIME TO EXPLORE THE “PRAYERS AND THANKSGIVINGS” SECTION IN THE BCP (PAGES 39-62, OR YOU CAN USE THE DOWNLOADABLE BOOKLET). AS YOUR GROUP MEMBERS COME ACROSS PRAYERS THAT THEY FIND RELEVANT, PAUSE AND PRAY THEM TOGETHER. IF YOU’RE PRESSED FOR TIME, YOU MIGHT CLOSE WITH THE THEMED PRAYER FROM THE AT-HOME CHALLENGE.

Then finish with the “Grace”, printed at the end of the Litany booklet.

JONAH 3-4: **MERCY, EVEN FOR NINEVEH**

3 ¹Then the word of the Lord came to Jonah the second time, saying, ²“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and call out against it the message that I tell you.” ³So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, three days’ journey in breadth. ⁴Jonah began to go into the city, going a day’s journey. And he called out, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!” ⁵And the people of Nineveh believed God. They called for a fast and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them to the least of them. ⁶The word reached the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. ⁷And he issued a proclamation and published through Nineveh, “By the decree of the king and his nobles: Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything. Let them not feed or drink water, ⁸but let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. ⁹Who knows? God may turn and relent and turn from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish.”

¹⁰When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it.

4 ¹But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry. ²And he prayed to the Lord and said, “O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster. ³Therefore now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.” ⁴And the Lord said, “Do you do well to be angry?... ¹¹And should not I pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?”