

SESSION TWO: MERCY (1 hour)

We recommend you read through these notes before leading the session. They are intended to help you understand the purpose and journey of the session, and to help you keep the group focused on the core issues.

OVERVIEW:

The focus of this week's session is the call of every Christian to love and serve those most in need in our community, and more broadly in the world. We recommend getting the group to engage with at least a couple of these core ideas:

- *God's test for genuine faith is how we relate to people*
- *Understanding that we are the needy recipients of God's compassion should mean that we are able to identify with others in need, and respond compassionately.*
- *God's call to a life of faith and compassion challenges us to prioritise serving others over lives of comfort and security for ourselves*
- *Serving people is about the availability of our time, our love, our possessions and relationships, not just our wallets.*

START (5min):

Share the responses you got from carrying out last week's take-away action.

The action may not have been completed by everyone, but even if only a few people did it, it's worth talking about their answers. The more that people make their own discoveries out and about during the week, the more meaningful the journey of this course will be for them.

OR

Watch the vox pop and discuss the question: how would your non-Christian friends answer the question, 'What has the church ever done for you?' What would be missed by the community if the church closed down tomorrow?

DISCUSS (20min):

Read Isaiah 58 together and answer these questions:

1. Make a list of the kinds of things that God considers acceptable worship in verses 6-10. How do they compare with what you've been taught about worship?
2. In verse 9 Isaiah claims there is an important link between our listening to the needs of others and God listening to us. When we are surrounded by so much need, how do we work out what to respond to?
3. In verse 12, Isaiah uses the image of the people of God as builders. How are we - as individuals, a group, a church - already involved in rebuilding our local community? What other areas of need are there?
4. How can we help to rebuild communities in other countries who suffer the effects of injustice?

Some thoughts on the questions:

- 1. A strong theme of Isaiah (and many other prophets) is the tendency of God's people to think that 'religious' practices such as animal sacrifices, prayers and fasting, are the things that please him. God repeats over and over his deeper desire for justice, and to see our devotion enacted publicly through our care for those who need it. Is it possible that we make the same mistake, and if so, what are the things that we over-prioritise at the expense of working for the common good?*
- 2. We live in an era where we are bombarded by far more cries of need than we can ever hope to answer. How do we stay open towards people without being overwhelmed and disempowered?*
- 3. You might want to look ahead of time at our website for ideas of what other churches around the UK are doing to serve their local communities. ([link to stories page](#)) A great place to start is by getting behind other great initiatives that are already happening in your neighbourhood.*
- 4. In our globalized world, we are also able to contribute to the well-being of other communities around the world, through advocacy and through partnering with organisations like Tearfund.*

WATCH (10min):

Watch the DVD clip 'Mercy' in which Elaine Storkey, Tim Keller and Tom Wright offer their thoughts on Isaiah 58. Discuss one of the following statements:

- There is a door in the heart that you can lock against compassion to the poor – but it's the same door you can lock against God's compassion to you.
- If you have really experienced grace, when you look at a poor person, you are looking in a mirror.
- It's often the poor of the world who have found the mercy and grace of God, who are better role models than many of us in more affluent countries.

STORY (5min):

Watch the DVD clip 'Swansea', which tells the story of a church in South Wales.

- The church started sacrificially serving their local community before they had a building, a stable congregation or any other programs. How does that challenge the way that we think about starting a church?
- Sarah, one of the church leaders, talks about not having enough money to eat every day when they began this work. How much are we prepared to sacrifice as we follow Jesus?

Or you might prefer to watch:

- The Gap – The same project, told from the perspective of the young people
- Shinewater centre, Shaftesbury – How a church-run debt advice centre helped keep a man from suicide
- Ballynahinch (description)
- South Kirby (description)
- MOSAIC Seeds (stories from overseas)

REFLECTION (Optional Extra):

Watch Shane Claiborne speaking about Mercy (4 min).

PRAY (15min):

The aim of this prayer time is to help create an environment where we realise our dependence of God and need to make this journey together. We all have many different reasons for drawing back from the challenges of passages like Isaiah 58, and we need the help of the Holy Spirit in overcoming them. We may feel unsure of how to put these things into practice, or scared of what God is asking of us. Fulfilling them would cost us something – perhaps time, possessions, energy, pride, money, comfort.

Re-read Isaiah 58:6-10. Share with one another how you are feeling and pray for the courage and love to respond to these challenges.

If sharing and praying in this way is too intimidating with the full group, you might like to encourage breaking into smaller groups or pairs.

You could prepare several pieces of paper with some ideas of things that stop us engaging with people in need written on them. These might include 'too busy', 'scared of mixing with people so different to me', 'don't know where to start', 'not sure if it's important'. Invite people to reflect on whether they identify with elements of any of these and invite people to pray for one another, or lead the group in a prayer in response.

If you have time, spend some time praying for the identified needs in the community. In a moment of quiet, ask God to show you a person, family, or group of people, whom he wants you to show his compassion and mercy.

ACT (5min):

This week's action is about taking time to listen to the needs of the people in your area. Give everyone a copy of the survey (on the website) and ask them to interview someone in their neighbourhood this week – it could be a neighbour, a shopkeeper or anyone you bump into.

You may want to take the opportunity to pray walk around the area at the same time.

EXTRAS

Don't forget to visit [website] for the extra clips and further reading.

For the session –

Extra film clips:

The Gap – The same project, told from the perspective of the young people

Shinewater centre, Shaftesbury – How a church-run debt advice centre helped keep a man from suicide
Ballynahinch (description)

South Kirby (description)

MOSAIC Seeds (stories from overseas)

Activity:

Invite a guest to join your group for the evening, someone who works in the local community (e.g. policeman, teacher, shop worker) and ask them the survey questions below (and any others you can think of).

In your own time –

Activity:

Survey

Name of interviewee:

Occupation/role:

How long have they lived or worked in this area?

What is the best thing about this area?

If you could change one thing about this area what would it be?

What could the church be doing more of to make this community a better place?

Inside Out journal – Chapter 2

Suggested further reading

- Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution* (Zondervan)
- Marijke Hoek and Justin Thacker, *Micah's Challenge* (Authentic)
- Bob Holman, *Faith in the Poor* (Lion)
- Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (Eden)
- Ann Morisy, *Beyond the Good Samaritan* (Mowbray)
- Bryant L. Myers, *Walking with the Poor* (Orbis)
- Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Hodder & Stoughton)