

Loving Criminals

Karen Hall

PURPOSE: The purpose of this program is to consider the idea of loving criminals. Who are the people of our day who are criminals? How would Jesus treat these people? How do we treat people who are different from us?

MUSIC: From “Hymns of Heritage and Hope, #670 “Are You Able?” (especially stanza 2). If your group does not enjoy singing, you may choose to read the song, especially the second verse.

SCRIPTURE: Luke 10: 25-37; Hebrews 13:1-3

PREPARATION:

Skit: Run off a copy of the opening skit and assign the needed readers. You may choose to make signs for the various characters to wear during the skit. Keep these signs to use in all the other skits.

Music: If using music, acquire enough hymnals for each person to have one. Have a recording or an instrumentalist play accompaniment.

Scripture: Have Bibles ready for use. Assign Scripture pieces at the start, to make reading through them smoother. Ask someone to have the Scripture Hebrews 13:1-3 open to read when asked.

Hook

Invite the people who are in the skit to go over to the side of the room and come in as their parts are read. If you have a small group, you may ask them to stay seated and just get up and act out their parts as appropriate and then be seated. The person who is acting out the man who is beaten does not have to get on the floor but may sit in a chair or recline on a couch. The point is to have each person walk by, and then go to the other side. This devotional will focus on criminals in the parable of the good Samaritan. As the Scripture is being read, the characters will act out the reading. At the end of the reading, the character who is the criminal will stand and share her part. The narrator may be the one giving the devotional or may be someone else. The narrator should read the Scripture slowly enough for the actors to play their roles.

SAY: “Today, I have the privilege of introducing the drama, Loving Criminals.” (Have the skit performed.)

SKIT: Loving Criminals

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?”

He answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.”

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he was attacked by robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’”

“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?”

The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”

The one who is the robber will look at the audience and say,

“I know, I know, I’m the bad guy in this story. For absolutely no reason I joined with others and beat a man we didn’t know, took all of his possessions and left him for dead. Do I have an excuse? Not really. I could blame the fact that I grew up hungry and alone. The other robbers took me in and together we formed a family of sorts.

I could tell you it’s because I’m lazy, and just don’t want to work like other people do. I could tell you it’s because I was beaten and abused myself and that’s all I know. Maybe it’s all of those things. Maybe it’s none of those things.

One thing I do know. Watching the other people go right on by the man we beat; well, I realize they're no better than I am! That priest, that Levite, they do a lot of talking but no action!

The Samaritan though, I don't know about him. We all know Samaritans aren't to be trusted. But look what he did.

I just don't know."

Book

SAY: "When we think about Scripture related to criminals we likely do not think first of this parable. We also probably do not think about all the Scriptures telling about Paul or Peter or others being in prison, even though by definition they were 'criminals.'"

ASK: What Scripture comes to your mind that mentions criminals or prison?"
As people share, discuss as appropriate.

One Scripture that is often mentioned is Matthew 25:35-40. If that is not mentioned, read it aloud now. Focus on verse 36:b "I was in prison and you came to me."

ASK: Does anyone remember the Scripture leading up to these verses? (Jesus was teaching about the final judgment and he is describing what will be said to the sheep - the ones who are saved.)

SAY: In these verses visiting those in prison is just as important as feeding the hungry, giving clothes to the naked, or taking care of strangers. In other words, in God's eyes, taking care of criminals is a part of who we are as Christians.

READ Hebrews 13:1-3.

SAY: These verses start with the command to let brotherly love continue. The theme fits perfectly with the parable we are studying this year. It goes on to remind us to show hospitality, which was mentioned in the Matthew Scripture we just read. Finally, verse 3 says, 'Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.' Rarely do we consider those in prison as if we are in prison with them. As Christians, we often fail to think of prisoners or criminals like we do other people who are less fortunate.

ASK: Why do you think that is? (Allow replies.) Are we behaving the way Scripture instructs us to behave? (Hopefully, they will agree we are not.)

Look

Share the following statistics with your group.

The prison population in the US is 639 per 100,000 people. (The US makes up 5% of the world's population, but 20% of the world's prison population is incarcerated in the US.)

In 2019, the US had about 2.1 million prisoners in total. That number is slightly less now.

About 10% of prisoners are in federal prisons. There are 110 federal prisons, 1,833 state prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails and 80 Indian County jails. On average, 76.6% of released inmates return to prison.

Drug-related offenses make up 46% of the prison population.

Fewer than 40 prisoners are serving sentences for offenses related to National Security. 6.8% of the prison population is female.

ASK: Do you find any of these statistics surprising? Allow for discussion.

SHARE: As Christians, we may feel hopeless. Maybe we feel afraid to take action. Perhaps we think we have no responsibility since these people are being punished for crimes they have been convicted of committing. All of this may be partially true. But, Scripture tells us we do have a responsibility to these people. What do you think about this responsibility?" Feel free to share your thoughts with the group. Perhaps our responsibility is to help those people who statistically are likely to become criminals.

ASK: Is there something we can do as Christian women?

ASK: Are there agencies with which we can become involved?

ASK: Can we volunteer to tutor children? What else can we do locally?

If we are honest with ourselves, we all know people personally who have either served time in prison or have broken the law and were not convicted. There are no families who have not been affected in some way by criminal behavior.

Took

SHARE: Chuck Colson was an attorney who served a brief time in prison for his role in the Watergate scandal during Richard Nixon's presidency. He became a Christian and wrote several books that are well worth reading. Mr. Colson founded Prison Fellowship after he was released. He often stated, "The ground is level at the foot of the cross." This means that no one must work harder than anyone else to be forgiven for their sins, and no one is so good they do not need forgiveness. Prison Fellowship's philosophy is "We believe that Jesus offers hope, healing and a new purpose for each life. He can make even the most broken people and situations whole again, replacing the cycle of crime with a cycle of renewal."

ASK: What can we do to be a part of the hope, healing, and new purpose for these people?

While we may feel overwhelmed, we must remember how Jesus responded to those who had broken the law. Even when Jesus was suffering terribly on the cross, he had compassion on the thief who asked for forgiveness. (Luke 23:32-43)

ASK: As a group, how can we demonstrate the love Jesus had for criminals?

Years ago, the phrase 'What Would Jesus Do?' became popular. Recently, another phrase has been added to answer that question. 'What would Jesus do? He would love first.' May that be our heart's desire, to love others first.

Shared by: Karen Hall has been a member of WHFMS all her adult life. She had the privilege of serving as the national president for nine years. Writing this program was a difficult one she says, because it opened her eyes to the times she has not behaved as the Good Samaritan. Karen and her husband, David, live at the Advent Christian Village, in Dowling Park, Florida.