Les Misérables: The Triumph of Mercy
A guide for small group study

This Week’s Prayer:
Lord God, As we open our hearts and minds to your presence, cleanse and refresh us anew with your redeeming mercy and grace. Heal our brokenness—and then use us to share your mercy with one another in our group, and with all the people with whom we come in contact in the week ahead. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

From the Sermon (July 13, 2008):
“In the preface to Les Misérables Hugo writes, “So long as ignorance and misery remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.” This story is a window to the gospel, and I would say, so long as ignorance and misery remain on this earth, the gospel will not be useless, for it both offers us mercy, and calls us to be merciful. This is an essential part of what it means to be human.” --Rev. Adam Hamilton in “Les Misérables: The Triumph of Mercy”

Knowing God

Read Micah 6:6-8, 7:18-20
How does Micah’s prophetic message connect our trust in God’s mercy with God’s call for us to show mercy to others? Who stands at the beginning of the cycle of mercy?

Read Luke 1:46-55
A Christmas text--in the heat of summer! How does Mary’s song of praise make “mercy” one of the key-notes of Jesus’ life and ministry even before his birth? What made God’s mercy particularly important to this Galilean peasant girl?

Loving God

Read Isaiah 53:1-8, Mark 15:25-39, 1 Corinthians 6:19-20
In Les Misérables, Jean Valjean’s life is changed when the Bishop gives him the silver candlesticks, and tells him, “I have bought your soul for God.” How is your heart affected by the price Christ paid for you? Are there points of resistance in you that need to crumble before Christ’s love and mercy?

Read Matthew 5:38-48, 18:21-35
God’s “perfection,” Jesus said, lies in showing mercy and grace to “the evil and the good,” not in enforcing rules. In your upbringing, how important were rigid rules, and categorizing people as “good” or “bad”? In what ways, if any, do Jesus’ words cause you to “stretch” inwardly, to question judgments you’ve tended to take for granted?

Read Luke 9:23-26
Jean Valjean gave up safety and ease, and saved an innocent man from prison, by identifying himself as an escaped convict. What’s the highest price you’ve ever been called on to pay for doing the right thing? What did you do? What factors did you consider in making your decision?
Serving God

Read Titus 3:3-8
Note how central the word “mercy” is in this passage. Discuss: those who have received mercy are called to “be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.” What does that devotion look like in your life?

Do you know anyone who needs your mercy (your undeserved favor)? What, if anything, stands in the way of you offering mercy to them? Join in prayer, asking God for the courage and strength to offer God’s mercy in relationships around the circle of your group.

For additional insight:
Les Misérables is a story of mercy, revealed in a story about two ways of trying to change the world and make it better. In this election year, Phillip Yancey’s words about power and mercy are worth pondering:

“All too often the church holds up a mirror reflecting back the society around it, rather than a window revealing a different way. If the world despises a notorious sinner, the church will love her. If the world cuts off aid to the poor and suffering, the church will offer food and healing. If the world oppresses, the church will raise up the oppressed. If the world shames a social outcast, the church will proclaim God’s reconciling love. If the world seeks profit and self-fulfillment, the church seeks sacrifice and service. If the world demands retribution, the church dispenses grace. If the world splinters into factions, the church joins together in unity. If the world destroys its enemies, the church loves them.

That, at least, is the vision of the church in the New Testament: a colony of heaven in a hostile world….

Perhaps the reason politics has proved such a snare for the church is that power rarely coexists with love. People in power draw up lists of friends and enemies, then reward their friends and punish their enemies. Christians are commanded to love even their enemies. Chuck Colson, who perfected the art of power politics under the Nixon Administration, now says he has little faith in politics to solve the social problems of today. Our best efforts at changing society will fall short unless the church can teach the world how to love.

Colson cites a poignant example of a Christian who obeyed the command of love rather than the rules of power. After President Nixon resigned in disgrace, he retreated to his San Clemente compound to live in virtual isolation. Because politicians did not want to sully their own reputations by being seen with him, Nixon had few visitors at first. One exception was Mark Hatfield, an outspoken Christian who had often opposed Nixon in the U.S. Senate. Colson asked why he risked the trips to San Clemente. ‘To let Mr. Nixon know that someone loved him,’ Hatfield replied.

I know something of the abuse Billy Graham received for meeting with Bill and Hillary Clinton and for praying at Clinton’s inaugurations. Graham too believes the command to love transcends political differences, and for this reason he has ministered to every president since Harry Truman, regardless of politics. In a private interview, I asked Reverend Graham which president he had spent the most time with. To my surprise, he named Lyndon Johnson, a man with whom he had deep political differences. Yet Johnson had a fear of death and ‘he always seemed to want a pastor around.’ For Graham, the person was more important than the policy….

At the height of the Cold War, Billy Graham visited Russia and met with government and church leaders. Conservatives back home reproached him for treating the Russians with such courtesy and respect. He should have taken a more prophetic role, they said, by condemning the abuses of human rights and religious liberty. One of his critics accused him of setting the church back fifty years. Graham listened, lowered his head, and replied, ‘I am deeply ashamed. I have been trying very hard to set the church back two thousand years.’

Politics draws lines between people; in contrast, Jesus’ love cuts across those lines and dispenses grace. That does not mean, of course, that Christians should not involve themselves in politics. It simply means that as we do so we must not let the rules of power displace the command to love….’Power without love is reckless and abusive,’ said Martin Luther King, Jr. ‘Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice.’” (Yancey, What’s So Amazing About Grace? Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997, pp. 262-265).