

CHAPTER ONE

“REMEMBER THE PRISONERS

“Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them”
(Hebrews 13:3)

Most Christians associate prison ministry with the high walls and guard towers of a large state or federal institution. This is only one of the many opportunities that exist in bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who are locked up. Pastors and lay people alike often do not understand the full extent of this unusual ministry because there are several different ways that we can serve our Lord in this important area of home mission work. We need to pray for prison outreach as we explore each of these opportunities.

We are told in Scripture to “Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them” (Hebrew 13:3). When we try to put ourselves in the place of the inmate or ex-convict or his family, we can better understand their special needs and minister to them effectively. There are six facts that you need to know about the justice system to help you understand prisoners and literally put yourself in their place.

FIRST: The prison system is big! The United States has more people in jail on a per capita basis than any other major nation in the world except Russia and South Africa. There are more than one million men and women in our nation’s 1280 big prisons or penitentiaries. If we add more than 500,000 prisoners in our local jails and city lockups, we have a total of more than one and a half million people in the United States that are incarcerated. We have 40 times as many people in prison on a per capita basis than in West Germany.

This may seem strange for a so-called “free” country, but here in the United States some citizens actually get into trouble because they can’t accurately judge right from wrong. Complete freedom to do as one pleases is more than some people can handle and a few will stray over the legal limits allowed by law. In order to protect our individual liberties, we have an elaborate and expensive procedure for prosecuting our citizens designed to protect their civil right. This is not the case in many foreign countries.

A friend of the author was in West Germany recently where he witnessed a fight on the street. The German police arrived and they simply fired their automatic weapons into the air and the fight was over. There was no trial, jail, bond, plea bargaining, lawyers or anything else. If the fight had not stopped someone might have been shot and killed to put an end to the action and the result would have been pretty much the same.

Very little expense is involved in the West German method of law enforcement, but we can’t accept that type of direct street settlement of crimes here in the United States.

We have an elaborate and sometimes cumbersome justice system that costs a great deal of money to operate, but it is necessary to protect our personal freedoms. When one adds all of the welfare and court costs along with the local, state and federal police together with thousands of jails at all levels, it becomes a very expensive method of law enforcement. When all costs are counted the justice and prison system is the second or third largest industry in America today. Prisons are very big business! It is a very large bureaucracy that doesn’t change easily. Ministering to prisoners must be done within the framework of a big part of our government known as the “correctional” system that is difficult to change.

SECOND: Prisoners are afraid! Everything connected with the justice system has a good deal of trauma or paranoia connected with it. When anyone is arrested, put on trial, and locked up, they go through severe emotional experience. This trauma has a lasting effect on prisoners and their loved ones who often do not understand what is really happening to them. We need to recognize this natural fear

when we deal with people going through the justice system in order to reach them for Jesus Christ. Our best effort to minister in prison will always be affected by this trauma.

THIRD: Inmates are usually men! There are about 40 or 50 men in the penitentiary in the United States for every woman that is locked up. This ratio holds true throughout the entire prison system except for the juvenile system. Women simply do not go to prison for one reason or another. They apparently don't commit as many violent crimes as men and many people feel that some judges give women lighter sentences. In any case, there are very few adult women in the nation's prison system and the prison ministry is almost exclusively a ministry to men.

FOURTH: Serious crimes are involved! Most inmates are in jail for serious violations of the law. Relatives and friends tend to minimize or "play down" the seriousness of the crimes, but chaplains and trained penal officers estimate that 95 percent or more of all convicts are guilty of very serious offenses in spite of what the newspaper or the relatives may say. The author was in jail with a young man who served three years for stealing beer, according to his story. When I inquired further into his crime, he told me that he had stolen an entire truckload of beer. That *was* a serious crime, of course, but not enough to justify three years in jail. So I inquired still further and found out that the young man had used a gun to take the truck away from the driver. He was really guilty of a very serious offense. The young man was in jail for armed robbery in spite of his effort to minimize the seriousness of the crime.

Most men are in jail for very substantial violations of law even though many of these crimes were committed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. The sad part about all of this is that only one criminal in 10 or 20 is caught and punished. Convicts are well aware of these facts. And, right or wrong, they tend to hold these odds against the system when they do get caught. They feel that society has come down hard on them and missed so many others that deserve punishment just as much as they do. There is no easy answer to this problem, but is more difficult to minister to convicts because of this built-in inequity in our justice system.

FIFTH: Prisons don't rehabilitate. When the author arrived at the penitentiary in 1978, the warden spoke to all of us, the new inmates, and said that we were *not* in the penitentiary to be "rehabilitated." He told us that we were in prison to be punished. He announced that the prison had many educational, work, and treatment programs and suggested that we should take advantage of them. He made it very clear, however, that the purpose of our incarceration was "punishment" and nothing else. He was telling it like it is! There is no rehabilitation in any jail. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ changes men's lives completely. The rest of the men who have a genuine conversion experience and Jesus Christ takes over their hearts and lives are rehabilitated.

Nearly one-third of the prisoners released each year in the United States return to prison within two years or less. It is a well established fact that committed Christians almost never return to prison for any reason. This is a reality that makes all your efforts to reach prisoners with the Gospel of Jesus Christ worth all the time and energy that you spend on it.

SIXTH: The prison ministry begins with basics! Few prisoners have any amount of religious training and they simply do not understand the theological and denominational differences. Most prisoners will respond negatively to theological arguments, so our approach inside the prison wall will be most effective if we emphasize those central truths which evangelical churches hold in common. Chaplains are seldom identified with sponsoring church groups while inside the jail. This allows the Gospel of Jesus Christ to gain a hearing even from those who otherwise might be put off by the denominational identity of the witness. Obviously where a continuing witness to an individual is possible, the full Scriptural message may be shared, including our distinctive Lutheran doctrines.

A prison sentence can be an extremely unpleasant experience and we need to try to understand the actual trauma that prisoners go through. When we "put ourselves in their place" we can better see the opportunity in the prison ministry. Each of the six major factors discussed here is an important part of the background we need to know to take advantage of this opportunity.