

CHAPTER TEN

MINISTERING TO THE PRISONER'S FAMILY

Whenever someone is sent to prison, there is almost always a family of some kind that is left behind to wait. It may be a wife, parents, brother, sister, almost any close friend or relative that cares about the new inmate. These people represent an unusual opportunity for dedicated Christians to minister to the family of a prisoner while he is in jail. There is probably no better time in the life of the prisoner's family to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to these relatives than during this critical period. They really need our love and concern. These people represent an excellent opportunity for evangelism and Christian outreach and they will be much more receptive to the gospel than usual.

Almost every social ministry, as outlined in Matthew 25: 31-40, applies to the family of prisoners. An entire book could be written on the requirements of these hurting people and our opportunity to serve our Lord personally by helping them with their daily needs. If these needs can be met, then renewed faith in Jesus Christ can overcome the heartache and traumatic effects of waiting for a loved one who is in prison. The family didn't commit the crime, but they are actually serving the time emotionally with the inmate that they love. Things won't get back to normal in their life until their loved one is released from prison and that may be many years away. It doesn't matter if the inmate deserved everything he got from the judge—things won't be right for the family until the inmate is released. They need the love of fellow Christians and the gospel of Jesus Christ to fill the void in their lives.

There are four things that you should remember as you minister to the family of a prisoner.

FIRST: Many of the necessities of daily life are furnished by welfare for needy dependent family members of any inmate. This is part of the high cost of incarceration in our society today. As Christians, we can help with the special needs of the prisoner's family like moving, automobile repair, prison transportation, and by checking that the daily necessities of life such as food, clothing and housing are actually furnished by welfare.

SECOND: The trauma and emotional effects of arrest, trial and incarceration are shared by the inmate's family and friends. They go through the strain of lockup and the brutal reality of the justice system with their loved one. Although they may not show it, they will be under this strain when you contact them.

THIRD: Relatives feel "locked-up" with their loved one who is in prison and they will continue to have this feeling to some degree until that person is released from jail. There is no way that anyone can adequately explain what it is like to have a loved one in prison without going through that experience personally. We must try to put ourselves in their place and try to understand how they must feel so that we can successfully minister to a prisoner's family.

FOURTH: It is well to remember that marriages are under a terrible strain at this time due to the total separation of both marriage partners. Survival of the marriage may depend on your Christian understanding and concern. If the prisoner can come home to a loving and waiting family, he has a much greater chance of avoiding crime and staying out of prison in the future.

The family of the prison inmate is deeply concerned about the absence and lock-up of their loved one. There are 10 things that you can do to ease the terrible burden they carry and deliver the message of salvation at the same time.

1. Pray for the prisoner and pray for his family. Nothing is more important than prayer!
2. Specifically, testify to the prisoner's family about your personal faith in Christ Jesus and invite them to share it.
3. Welcome them into your church without condemning them for what their loved one may have done.

4. Visit the inmate at the prison and tell the relatives how well the visit went for you.
5. Include the prisoner's family in community and church affairs to help them lead a normal life while they wait.
6. Assist the prisoner's family with special needs as moving or car repair.
7. Help the family arrange transportation to the jail for regular prison visits.
8. Keep yourself fully informed by subscribing to the prison newspaper or joining an established prison service organization so you can better understand the family's needs.
9. Teach others about the special requirements of a prisoner's family and invite them to help.
10. "Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them" (Hebrews 13:3). Also, remember the prisoner's family and try to understand how they feel.

Churches or civic organizations in large metropolitan areas can consider operating a bus between the population center and the state penal institution. A modest fee can be charged to those who can afford it and the transportation can be given to those who can't pay. A simple Christian ministry can be conducted during the bus trip enroute to the prison by dedicated Christians who ride along.

There is nothing that will benefit an inmate more after his release than a waiting Christian family that is ready to take him back and help him start his life over again. You can accomplish a dual purpose by bringing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the prisoner's family and helping the inmate readjust to society when you minister to the family of someone in prison.