

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### MINISTERING TO THE EX-OFFENDER

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A prison term can be a terrible thing and ex-offenders have had a traumatic experience. They tend to distrust the justice system and society in general. They need our acceptance and understanding. Their background and prison sentence often leaves a deep scar on their emotional make-up. Your ministry and the love of Jesus Christ can help them over-come the trauma and paranoia caused by being locked up in prison. If they are new Christians, we need to accept them into our churches and realize that their prison sentence may influence their attitude and actions for sometime to come. They need our acceptance, tolerance and prayers.

One of the most difficult tasks that any Christian can face today is ministering to an ex-offender. The social, educational and personal experience background of the ex-convict is so different that basic understanding and communications are hard to achieve. Both pastors and laymen often experience difficulty in relating to ex-convicts and in delivering their divine message without sounding like a New Testament Pharisee. Even the most effective evangelists may not succeed in reaching these individuals for Christ.

Ministering to an ex-offender is much the same as ministering to a recovering alcoholic. Often the two are one and the same person. Many times an offender is caught and prosecuted because his drug or alcohol problem slowed his judgment or reaction time. Maybe he got the “nerve” to go ahead with a particular crime while under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Often we are ministering to a combination recovering alcoholic and ex-convict.

It is a common mistake to assume that all criminals are repeaters, just as it is an error to assume that alcoholics cannot recover. Figures show that nearly two-thirds of all convicts released from the prison system in the United States never return to jail.

While there is no accurate national population census on ex-convicts, it is reliably estimated that there are over 10 million ex-offenders in America today who are quietly forgetting the past and hoping no one will remember or ever find out. It is easy to see how more than 500,000 men and women in our prisons and local jails can quickly multiply into millions of ex-offenders. More than half of them finish their sentences and are released back into society each year and two-thirds of them never go back to any jail in the future.

The important thing about an ex-convict is that he wants to forget. He firmly believes he has paid his debt to society and he doesn't need to be reminded of his past failure. If we can honestly treat him as “paid in full” in the eyes of the law, we can conduct a much more successful ministry. Most ex-convicts never talk about their experiences nor advertise their status as such. They are in your neighborhood, factory, church or civic group and you simply don't know about it. They seldom discuss their past life with anyone. These ex-offenders present a distinct and different challenge for your evangelistic effort.

The average American citizen does not realize the basic problems that most ex-convicts face in everyday life. Normally they cannot make even small credit purchases without help from a co-signer or guarantor. Insurance companies sometimes hesitate to issue any type of liability insurance to them because they feel that an ex-convict does not make a “good witness” in court in future litigation resulting from the policy coverage.

Many times the ex-convict faces family and financial problems as a result of his prosecution and incarceration. He knows he may never be able to win a criminal trial again even if he is innocent because most juries will not consider him to be a good and creditable witness and accept his testimony in self-defense. He is forever on guard against the blunt and outspoken citizen who wants to verbally put him down because of his criminal record and he tries to avoid these obvious confrontations.

It takes an ex-convict at least one year after he is released to start thinking normally. Some prisoners, who have been locked up for several years, need three years or more to adjust their thinking

to the outside. Prison life requires special defensive thinking a self-preservation or loner attitudes that fit into the inmate culture of a penitentiary. After you have adjusted to life inside the prison wall, it takes time to readjust to the outside society.

By outward appearance the ex-offender is normal and he obeys the law as he sets an acceptable daily schedule for himself, but the inner person is still emotionally tuned to prison life. The author is an ex-convict and can personally relate to these problems and needs. No one can ever adequately explain what it is like to be locked up month after month and year after year! You must try to understand incarceration to minister to the ex-offender.

There are three distinct areas that affect the attitude of the ex-convict toward your ministry:

**FIRST:** He lacks self-respect that obviously comes from being locked up in a social system that attaches a certain stigma to imprisonment.

**SECOND:** He has a mistrust for society that comes from watching a system come down hard on him, while missing many others who deserve punishment just as much as he does. He has viewed the many others who deserve punishment just as much as he does. He has viewed the many inequities in the justice system over the years and is afraid it will fail again for him.

**THIRD:** He usually lacks a secondary education to communicate with you and digest what you have to say. He also may not be able to read the regular Christian literature that you use in your ministry. Ex-convicts are well above the national average in basic intelligence, but are well below average in literacy and grade level. As such, they present a good profile as a potential learning group but are not easily trainable because of the lack of self-respect, mistrust for society in general, and a basic lack of reading ability.

If the ex-offender is still married he may need many months to readjust to his wife, who has become accustomed to living alone. He may also need to overlook an affair that his wife may have had because of the lonely months or years without her husband. As you minister to this ex-offender you can only guess that this may be the case. Experienced prison counselors will tell you that such an arrangement by the wife is more common if the husband's incarceration lasts more than one year.

The ex-offender may be concealing more than marital infidelity, also. He may know of hideous crimes that are not yet solved or ones that were planned while he was in jail. He may have committed other crimes that have not caught up with him yet and lives in the uncertainty of the situation until the statute of limitations expires on the event, which may be several years away. Sometimes the statutes never expire on a specific event. All these things plague an ex-offender along with the trauma of his arrest and incarceration.

This is the reason that the ex-offender may not wish to take up normal church activities during the first few weeks of freedom. He may shy away from social events or even skip church services once in awhile even if he is a Christian. He is apt to be reclusive for a period of time as he eventually leaves the prison cell and gets adjusted to his new life outside the prison wall. The odds against us are great as we try to minister to these hard-to-reach people. Therefore an effective outreach must circumvent these difficulties and deal effectively with the real problems. A complete grasp and understanding of his prison lifestyle and thinking are important. You face many of the same problems that a foreign missionary has in getting to know your subject.

Here are the 10 most important things that you need to do to effectively minister to the ex-offender:

1. Pray for the ex-offender and pray for his family. Don't try this complicated ministry without prayer!
2. Build confidence through compassion and use a straight forward approach in ministering to him. Be aware of the fact that he may regard you as part of the "system" that went wrong with him.
3. Don't compliment the justice system because he doesn't completely trust it. You can talk about it if you want to, but be objective and open to his side of the story.
4. Don't discuss his criminal case because he would like to forget it and you should too. Convicts have a saying in prison, "Get off my case" which means leave me alone, in the legal sense.

5. Give him time to adjust to his new life on the outside. A prison experience can be a terrible thing and each passing month helps him forget about it more and more. He wants and needs to forget.
6. Give him your personal testimony about your faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Don't be embarrassed! He comes out of a blunt prison society and expects you to share your personal faith. Deep down inside he knows that God is very real from experiences he has had inside the prison.
7. Be satisfied with a good meeting and don't expect immediate results. Ex-convicts have a decision-making "time lag" developed in prison by many months of time to form any new opinions.
8. Tell him your church wants him and really mean it! Go back and prepare your church to receive him. Your biggest problem could be your own congregation or fellowship.
9. Don't expect him to act completely "normal" by regular congregational standards. He doesn't have a normal background, so please try to accept him as is and let time heal the emotional injuries caused by incarceration.
10. Forgive and forget. Former inmates keenly feel that they have "done their time" and paid their debt to society for their crime. We need to regard it that way, also. Our Savior forgives them and enables us to forgive and this is a very good place to start.

As Christians we need to try to understand the emotional trauma of arrest and incarceration and use compassion and understanding in ministering to the ex-offender. We need the FRUIT of the Holy Spirit in our own lives as outlined in Galatians 5:22—Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Humility and Self-Control to effectively carry out this important ministry. We need to approach this ministry as outlined in Hebrews 13:3 "Remember the prisoners as though in prison with them." If we mentally put ourselves in prison with them, we will begin to understand their unusual needs.

Finally, expect success in your work, but be willing to accept some failures. When you succeed, you have accomplished one of the most difficult tasks that any Christian can tackle as you minister to an ex-offender. Success in this area makes you a real professional, but more than that, you have reached a new person in a difficult situation for our Lord and Savior. His changed lifestyle will benefit society, but much more important is the salvation of another soul. There is no greater accomplishment.