

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF INCARCERATION

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Society pays a tremendous cost whenever someone is sent to prison. There is the expense of a trial and welfare along with the actual cost of the lockup for a period of years. The author estimates that all the expenses of his trial, appeal, incarceration, parole and final discharge probably cost our government more than one hundred thousand dollars. His crime was relatively simple and easy to prosecute and his actual prison sentence was less than one year.

Some criminal trials alone have totaled more than half a million dollars. These costs are not the only price society pays for crime and the justice system. The final and total figure may never fully be counted because the prison population is growing so rapidly in America, and there are the long-term effects or costs of locking people up. This is the hidden price that society pays for incarceration many years into the future.

Christians need to be aware of the long-term results of a prison sentence so they can effectively minister to anyone regardless of how long it has been since they left the jail cell. While most Christians never return to prison, almost any ministry to ex-offenders will eventually deal with the delayed effects of a prolonged lockup. What is the ex-offender going to be like after a few years of freedom? Here are seven things you can look for:

**FIRST:** Ex-offenders who have served a substantial prison sentence (six or eight years or more) may permanently withdraw from society including church attendance. This is not hard and fast rule, but if they have served 15 years or more they may never fully return to regular church attendance and other public events. They are not against the church or organized meetings, but would rather just not be in any group. They seldom attend meetings of any kind as a result of their prison experience.

**SECOND:** They will distrust the justice system in spite of many good years of prison free life. They have seen the system fail for them so many times that they probably will never fully trust *any* political system ever again.

**THIRD:** They know how to live a simple life without a lot of material possessions. While you can say that this is a matter of economic necessity for many of them, the truth is that they have learned to live the simple life while they were in prison and are satisfied with it.

**FOURTH:** They don't rock the boat. Ex-convicts seldom change jobs or leave satisfactory employment situations once they get established on the outside of the prison wall. Again this is not a firm rule, but they tend to make basic economic changes in their life less often than the average man on the street.

**FIFTH:** They tend to "think evidence." They know what makes up "proof" or "evidence" in a criminal trial and tend to conduct their legitimate affairs on a daily basis as though they might have to "prove" their actions in court some day. They seldom get lost for several days. They are always able to substantiate their activities and daily location by paper work or bonafide witnesses. They get receipts for cash purchases. This is done to various degrees by long-term convicts.

**SIXTH:** They are loners by regular social standards. They are very nice fellows to be with (or talk to) but would rather be alone.

**SEVENTH:** Almost all of them have a deep-seated faith in some kind of higher power or God. This may be the reason that they have stayed out of jail for so long. It may take the form of true Christianity through a positive salvation experience with our Lord Jesus Christ or it could be a simple respect for a higher power. They know that God is real from experiences that they have had inside the prison. We need to direct that faith to include a personal relationship with our Lord and Savior.

Not all of the above traits will show up in every long-term ex-offender, but most men who have served an extended prison sentence will show some of these attitudes. When we minister to them we

need to review the list and see how each of these potential problems can affect our ministry. The ex-offender may seem distant and aloof when he is really not that way at all. He probably will not beat your door down to talk to you, but he can be very cooperative because he has had a lot of training in just getting along in the world.

He represents very little threat to society and his passive attitude will make your approach to him easy to present and difficult for him to actually receive. Don't misjudge him because of his conservative or loner attitudes. He is hearing you. He respects your message and you are reaching him for our Lord Jesus Christ. Work him into one or two activities in your church such as Bible study or your local jail ministry and then let him do his own thing. You can successfully minister to the long-term ex-offender if you know and understand your subject.

It is not normal for a human being to be locked up over a prolonged period of time. The long-term effects of incarceration become more evident the longer an individual is held in custody. If the prisoner makes good use of his time and regularly exercises his mind and his body, he can survive many years of incarceration without undue loss of normal human responses. Much will depend on the actual type of lockup. Outside of the emotional damage to his well-being, the brain and body tend to function well in a lockup. Prisoners are generally free from drugs and alcohol during their sentence and some medical care is usually available.

The *type* of medical service is what contributes to their trauma. This is why you will often hear prisoners complain about medical care in a prison and frequently they are right. Remember Hebrews 13:3 and picture yourself locked up and dubious about the medical care you were receiving for a health condition or symptoms you thought you had. You can't see a different doctor of your choice so this dilemma would have long lasting emotional effects on anyone. You may think you are sick from imprisonment long after you are released and you may just be right.

When you enter a prison and stay there for years, you lose track of prices, automobile models, the job market, clothing styles, and even everyday idioms or street slang. Time literally stands still as one month turns into the next. So do the years and even the decades. Correctional officers, prison volunteers and chaplains who go in and out of a prison on a daily basis don't fully understand what it is like to enter a prison one time and abruptly stay there for months or years. As we begin to deal with the individual ex-offender and minister to him, we will always encounter the long-term effects of incarceration. It will be evident for many years even after he is released.

The ex-offender tends to blame his economic and family problems on his incarceration. If his wife was unfaithful or his children undisciplined, he tends to blame "the system" that went wrong for him rather than himself for committing the crime. "After all, look at all the ones that they didn't catch who have done things much worse than I did," he says. "How come I didn't get probation when so many others did." These are real questions that defy firm answers except to be judgmental. This is the last thing that Christians should do to win this ex-offender for Christ.

What can we do and how can we lead this wary individual to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ? It's not easy but let's look at some real answers from the *standpoint* of the ex-offender.

1. **God is love** and the former prisoner needs love and not judgment. Simple, kind gestures and real friendships are more meaningful to prisoners after incarceration than ever before. He needs a real friend. Take time to be one and take the Gospel with you each time you go.
2. **He appreciates little things** more than ever. The sunrise, a little child, a dog or cat, and a home cooked meal. Anything that he was deprived of in the prison has special meaning. Real silverware and a wooden toilet seat are little things that he was deprived of for many years.
3. **Recognize him as an individual** with a personal experience background and not as a jailbird with a past. He may regard your overweight or your divorce or other socially acceptable personal problems as far more serious than his own prison stay. His background and yours are different. Recognize it as such and accept his background as "equal" to yours. Maybe this is tough for a Christian to do, but it is necessary to reach this man for Christ. Our Lord associated with sinners and tax collectors who were regarded as the very worst type of people in New

Testament days. Our Master would readily befriend ex-convicts today regardless of their crimes and prison terms. We can hardly do less.

4. **Involve the ex-convict** in your Christian social life and use *his* talents whenever you can or wherever he is willing. You may find him very reluctant shortly after release but this is normal. It takes one to three years or more after release from the penitentiary to “brush the cell hall dust off your shoes,” as we say of a return to normal life by regular social standards. The long-term effects of his jail experiences will still be evident, but he will be thinking more normally after that. It is at this time that we can draw him into our Christian group and use his talents. If he can cook or write or do carpenter work, then we should request his help and tell him that we *really* need him. It will be hard for him to say no because he wants to help. He wants the love and he needs the attention that your project will give him. Most of all you will be there to lead him closer to the Lord and do it on a basis that is real as far as an ex-offender is concerned.

Don't forget the long-term effects of incarceration. Years after his release from prison the ex-offender still doesn't trust our justice system or “fly the flag,” so to speak. His mistrust may not be fully justified but it is very real to him and a permanent part of the cost of jail time in America today. Billions of dollars in productivity has been lost to our society by talented men who had the misfortune of going to jail. When they get out of prison their attitude is often wary and mistrusting. As Christians we can help to overcome this gigantic social problem and not only minister to him but help him return to society as a normal productive individual.