

CHAPTER FIVE

PROFILE OF A PRISONER

Many well-meaning Christians put all inmates into one general category that includes dirt, drugs, and derogatory language. The television version of “Rocky the Convict” with his ball and chain hardly fits today’s prison population. The modern day inmate is under 28 years old, chemically dependent (drugs or alcohol), and a grade school drop-out. While he is above normal in intelligence, he is way below average in grade level. He has probably gone to school (on the average) through the ninth grade, but he will test out at the seventh or eighth grade level. He usually has no formal church training and has not been baptized. He may come from a broken home and was probably abused to some extent as a child. He is serving his first prison term, although he has probably been arrested before as a juvenile at least once.

His prison sentence (the one he will really serve) is about 18 months to 24 months of actual jail time and he probably will *not* come back into the prison system again after he gets out. If he does repeat and comes back to prison, it is likely that he will do so within two years after his release. About one-third of the first offenders will actually come back although some of them may return several times. Other than this description of a typical average inmate, the prison system holds all kinds of people from the 70-year-old rapist and the New York stock broker to the small town banker and the local drug pusher at the area high school. There is one thing about almost all offenders that few people consider. They are often frustrated *doers* or *achievers*.

The author of this book led a Bible study in one of the nation’s big prisons and helped conduct a round robin of sharing individual ideas and thoughts. Inasmuch as I was the leader, I needed to say something meaningful to the group, so I carefully considered each man as he presented his thoughts to the group. When it was my turn to share, I simply said that “all of us are here in this prison today (including myself as an ex-offender) because of some excess in our life; excess drugs, excess alcohol, excess sex, excess money in my case, excess violence or other overdoing.”

The room became very silent as a young inmate stood up and glared at me and said, “I’m glad you said that.” He was realizing for the first time in his life why he was really locked up at this prison. It was the tremendous drive or tendency to go to “excess” that finally resulted in a crime worthy of a jail sentence. The local bum in your home town will probably be arrested once or twice and serve out his probation as near the legal line as he can; but it is the intelligent “strong-willed” person who goes to extremes in everything he does, who will finally violate the law with a felony that society cannot overlook. Everything he does is done so hard or done to excess.

Bringing Christ into a life like this provides the person with resources to struggle successfully against these evil tendencies and may result in dramatic deliverance. Christ is the whole source of a new life and victory over excess of any type, both inside and outside the prison wall.

Special mention needs to be made about inmates’ reading skills and ability. Inmates usually cannot study and comprehend the regular Christian material that we give them as part of our ministry. This doesn’t mean that we should not give them what we have, but we need to look for simple reading material that they can understand.

Modern language (easy to read) Bibles, in large print type, are often needed along with Bible studies that are designed for the junior high level. These go a long way in compensating for inmate reading problems. Considerable work has been done in this area of the prison ministry during the past few years. Most major prison ministries in the United States now have simple source material available that inmates can read and understand. Simplified Scripture and Bible studies with a lower vocabulary word count can be obtained through these national prison ministries by writing to them with specific information on the grade level you need.

When you minister in prison you will find many inmates who could easily be your dad or son if one serious major event (of excess) had not occurred to change their lives to a prison cell for many years. One capital crime is one too many. A chaplain the author worked with in a large Midwest prison looked out over dozens of men in the prison yard one day and said, "There, but by the grace of God, am I." He knew just as the author does that there is a fine line between those who are in and those who are out of the prison system. That's the strange truth about incarceration.