

CHAPTER SIX

MINISTERING IN THE PENITENTIARY

One of the most important ministries in our country is the opportunity to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to men and women in large state federal prisons. Inmates in these institutions have been convicted of serious crimes and desperately need your Christian love and concern. While the high walls and guard towers of these large prisons scare many well-meaning Christians away, few ministries offer a greater challenge for dedicated Christians than this one.

The key to the prison ministry is prayer and the prison chaplain. It is important to pray daily for prisoners and pray before each prison visit. It is also important to utilize the prison chaplain and his office as a prison staff officer. He can help you direct your evangelistic effort to achieve the maximum possible results within the social culture and security restrictions of a large penitentiary.

Christians who accept the challenge to minister in a big prison or penitentiary need to know *three* basic facts about prisons and the opportunity to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ past the front door (or the control center) of a major penal institution.

FIRST: All types of “security levels” from solitary confinement to trustee status exist at most large state and federal institutions. You must know the rules and they vary from state to state and from institution to institution. What’s “minimum” security in Nebraska can be “medium” security in Minnesota. You must know the institution and how to gain access or you simply will not get in to minister. You must seek out this information on each prison you want to enter. It is most likely that an officer of the institution *must* be present at the Bible study or church service and the chaplain must furnish or arrange for this guard status.

Sometimes Christian officers will volunteer to serve as a “guide” for outside groups and you can start a Bible study or church service with this dedicated Christian officer as your required guard. In any case, the entire service must be cleared with the chaplain and planned well ahead of time. Don’t assume anything about “security” except that it will vary from prison to prison and you will get into each prison in a little different manner. The chaplain is the final link to the system and you must plan your activities with him.

SECOND: Newcomers to the prison ministry tend to be *afraid* and this is natural, but unwarranted. The visiting room and chapel are the safest places in the entire prison. God’s people who bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ enjoy a special status among inmates and guards alike. Even non-Christian inmates respect the men and women who bring in Christian testimony and they consider the place of worship as “holy” and untouchable.

During a recent riot at the St. Louis City jail (an institution of several hundred inmates) the religious statues were left untouched when everything else was destroyed. Do not be afraid to go and do our Lord’s work. His shield of protection will go with you as you proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

THIRD: Christians wonder what to say to “tough” criminals and the answer is quite simple. Radiate the love of Jesus Christ in your *own* life and talk about your faith in direct and positive terms. The surroundings eliminate much of the usual need for small talk and you can witness face-to-face on equal terms. Tell him about Jesus Christ and explain the way of salvation. (See pages 43-45.) Any small talk should center around the reason for your visit, which is to come and see him (the inmate) and tell him about Christ.

The most effective person that you can bring into the prison with you to witness is a Christian ex-convict. If he is a Christian ex-offender experienced in conducting prison services you can have a tremendous meeting as he “lays it on the line” in tough prison language and tells it like it is! If you have a chance to go into a big prison and attend a large service with men like Al Hanson (the author), Jim Tucker, Jerry Graham, George Meyer, Ted Jefferson, or any other ex-convict who is an experienced

preacher inside a big prison, you will have a great service and you will see an effective prison ministry in action. Many are brought to saving faith as the Holy Spirit moves throughout a big prison or penitentiary during special services like this.

In order to *minister* in prison you must *visit* in prison. Our Lord regards visiting in prison so highly that we are told in Matthew 25:40 that it is the same as if we had visited our Savior personally. Jesus puts the same emphasis on prison visitations as He does on feeding the hungry, clothing the needy, and visiting the sick. We need to *visit* in prison to bring the Gospel to men and women behind the walls of a big penitentiary or prison. There are three ways to visit in prison.

FIRST: You can write letters and correspond with prisoners. You should get the name and address of an inmate from the chaplain at any large prison or from an established prison service organization. As I mentioned in the preceding chapter, convicts are above average in intelligence but well below average in grade level and many prisoners have a limited letter writing ability. You don't need to leave your home to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to prisoners by mail.

SECOND: Recent court orders have offered telephone usage to almost all prisoners and you can talk to an inmate via telephone if you are willing to accept the phone charges. Many prisoners have NO one else to call and they would welcome the opportunity to visit with you by telephone. Make the initial contact through a prison chaplain or an established prison service organization, and use the personal contact to testify to your faith in our Lord and Savior. The prisoner can respond to you and ask questions in a telephone conversation.

THIRD: Go to the penitentiary and visit in person. If you don't know someone that you can visit in person, then you should contact a prison service organization or the prison chaplain and tell them as much about yourself as you can so they can properly match you to an inmate for visiting. The chaplain can arrange your first personal religious visit with a specific inmate and explain how to meet the prison's security requirements for additional visits. You may want to become a part of an inmate's permanent visitors list.

You can also join a religious group already going into the prison on a regular basis to help them with their established ministry. It will help you get on-the-job training. Eventually you could organize your own religious group meeting inside the prison after you learn the special needs of this unusual ministry. As you visit in prison on a one-to-one basis (or with a group) keep in mind that you are in a different environment and culture. The inmate is subject to different social pressures and security regulations than we are outside the prison wall. The following guidelines will help you conduct your visit to the penitentiary in the best possible manner.

TWENTY DO'S AND DON'T FOR VISITING IN PRISON

DO visit a prisoner somewhere soon. It will do you as much good as it does him.

DON'T be afraid. You are not in danger when you visit in prison.

DO dress casually. Avoid flashy clothing.

DON'T go without making an advance contact with authorities. If you don't make advance arrangements you will probably be turned away.

DO be there early. Sometimes prison security officials need extra time to process your visit.

DON'T take camera or tape recorder to the prison. There are not usually allowed inside.

DO smile. It's contagious even in prison.

DON'T give the prisoner anything unless you check first with the authorities. Contraband may be suspected if you do.

DO tell the prisoner how good he looks. Self-respect is important, especially in prison.

DON'T plan to stay more than about one hour unless you have come a long way. Individual conversation wears thin after that time even among people who know each other well.

DO talk about a bright future. He will probably do very well when he is released, but he is unsure of himself right now.

DON'T bring up family problems. If the prisoner wants to talk about them, you can follow his lead.

DO tell the prisoner about Jesus. He will be more receptive to your testimony than you might think.

DON'T talk about the prisoner's criminal case. He would probably like to forget it just as you should.

DO tell him you care. This has special meaning to someone in prison.

DON'T compliment any part of the prison system. This is a fundamental rule because prisoners do not appreciate their incarceration.

DO tell the prisoner when you will be back to visit again. He will look forward to it.

DON'T forget to pray daily for the prisoner. Pray for their safety and pray for their salvation.

DO encourage others to visit in prison. Tell them how well it went for you.

DON'T forget to contribute to a prison ministry. The need is great in all prison ministry agencies.

Your ministry in a large penitentiary is one of the great mission opportunities still available to Christians without leaving your home country. It is like a foreign mission field with a different culture and very special entrance requirements due to security regulations. You face many of the same problems that foreign missionaries experience as you minister to inmates in a large prison or penitentiary. It is your chance to serve the Lord in a very unique way.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The *Twenty Do's and Don'ts* were copyrighted in 1981 and reprinted with permission from the author of this book, Allen D. Hanson, Box 9, Ottertail, Minnesota 56571.