

Cross-Reach

The Least of These

Text: Matthew 25:35-40... I was in prison and you visited me....I say to you, in as much as you do it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.

Theme: A man without compassion to reach across the walls (despite the circumstantial wall) to the least of these is a man without a destiny.

Sermon: In the USA, a correctional facility is being constructed every 10 days. The omnibus cry of correctional residents is ever before us. The cry for liberation not from just for physical deliverance only, but spiritual and emotional deliverance from mental pain, from the mental quagmires of oppression, and from the concrete jungles of these dark gloomy holes call prisons.

Isaiah 61:1 said that the Spirit of the Lord God is upon me. Because the Lord has anointed me to preach glad tidings to the poor. He sent me to heal the brokenhearted. To proclaim liberty to the captives. And the opening of the prison to those who are bound. Isaiah introduces us to the Servant Messenger Jesus who magnifies the need to share the good news of the gospel with the disenfranchised and to bring about holistic transformation in their lives.

The need to proclaim liberty to the captives is greater than ever before to reach the 2.3 million men and women locked up in the correctional facilities in the USA alone. The USA incarcerates 25% of the worlds prison population. The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.

Perhaps you are not aware of the vastness of the prison vineyard. Let me share it with you there are:

- 1,833 State Prisons
- 110 Federal Prisons
- 1,772 Juvenile Correction Facilities
- 3,134 Local Jails
- 218 Immigration Facilities
- 80 Indian County Jails
- Several Psych Forensic and Civil Commitment Centers.

From our state and local prisons this year alone 655,000 correctional residents will return to our communities. Every month 54,583, every week 12,596, every day 1,794 will return to society. Some of them will be members of our congregations. Hopefully, the cry of Jesus will not be a present reality in our day, as it was with the Jewish nation and He will not have to say; [*I came to my own and they did not receive me*]. (John 1:11)

When Jesus said “when I was in prison you visited me If you have done it to the least of these my brethren you have done it to me”, it was a plea for “Cross-Reach” or compassion for the excluded. He was saying that you are the best communicators of God’s grace to those who are alienated from society. You are the conduit pipes that the Holy Ghost flows through.

Compassion is feeling or showing concern for those who are sick, hurt, poor, disadvantaged, or locked up in a custody facility. Compassion is a state of mind that in the most extenuating circumstances will cause the most insensitive person to enter a state of submission from their hardcore positions about others and issues.

Case and point; We are often insensitive to those who are less fortunate than us or those who are locked up in a correctional facility, until someone in our immediate family is incarcerated. Then our “out of sight out of mind” mentality shifts from insensitivity to a yearning for compassion.

When we are without compassion, we are prisoners ourselves- locked up in a cell of self-centeredness with no parole in sight unless we have an attitude change. Selfishness is at the top of a list of sins. Lucifer is the prime example. **Ellen G. White** in *The Upward Look* pg. 16:4 said that selfishness is an abomination to God.

John Holmes said that there is no exercise better for the heart than reaching down and lifting people. When we refuse to lift our fellow man, we have the **Dungeon Complex** which permits us to be satisfied with the darkness of selfishness.

Matthew 25:35-40 is that great missionary imperative that proclaims and announces Jesus’ judgement upon those who have no compassion for the disenfranchised. His big six missionary imperative includes the: (1.) hungry, (2) thirsty, (3) homeless, (4) naked, (5) sick, and (6) prisoner.

I call this text the **Bondage Phenomenon** because it highlights those who are at a disadvantage and who need to be delivered from their present condition. These are conditions that Jesus never shunned nor refused to bring deliverance to those who are suffering. He came to be a servant and not to be served.

The text suggests that we are in a judgment hour dilemma that is characterized by what we do for the poor and the disenfranchised. There will be two classes: (1) those who have had compassion for the ostracized and (2) those who have neglected those who have been ostracized. Those who stop up their ears to those who are ostracized one day will cry out for help and God will not hear them.

- Nehemiah cried out against his own people for their insensitivity toward the poor and oppressed. And whether we like it or not our destinies are tied up in the destinies of the poor and oppressed. **John Doane** said “No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main...” Each man’s death diminishes me because I am a part of the main. It was **Mother Theresa** who said so eloquently, “if we have no peace it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.”

Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without love and compassion humanity could not survive. **Dr Martin L. King** denoted that, “I can’t be what I ought to be unless you become what you ought to be and you can’t become what you ought to be unless I become what I ought to be.” We are all wrapped up in a cocoon of inescapable mutuality.

Living in your own separate worlds is an insult to God and defies the principles of reason for creation. **R. C. Sprout** in writing entitled “*Let God Lean on You*” said that, “when we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit the imprisoned we bear witness to the compassion of Christ.” Jesus came because he cared about every fallen soul of humanity. His heart aches when a soul is destroyed, imprisoned, or succumbed by adversity. He knew that the correctional system was going to do more corruption than correction. He has a natural affinity for those who have been detached from the main because of their circumstances.

Jesus said that he was in prison and every time we share His love with one of His children behind bars, it was specially noted by Him. **Ellen G. White** in *The Desire of Ages* pg. 638 states, "The fallen, the erring and the sinful, Christ's love embraces; and every deed of kindness done to uplift a fallen soul, every act of mercy, is accepted as done to him." Every child of humanity behind prison walls is a son and daughter of Adam and thus one of the least of these.

Who are the least of these?

- Those who are trapped in the concrete jungles of our prisons.
- Those who are smothering in claustrophobic 5 x 8 prison cells.
- Those who are sitting on death row with no hope. Life to them is a long corridor with no exit signs.
- Those who are sitting in cramped up jail cells with clouds of uncertainty and inferiority overcasting their mental horizons.
- Some boy girl sitting in a juvenile facility whose next step is to a dark dreary dungeon called a correctional facility.
- Some woman stripped of her dignity constrained in a custody dilemma.
- That young black male trapped in the quagmire of drugs and alcohol crushed by the rapacious tentacles of a cruel environment. His hope is decimated, his pride has dissipated, his self-esteem has been eradicated, his self-worth has been eviscerated, his opportunities have been obliterated, His beliefs have been annihilated, his potentials are emaciated, he has been socially castigated, he is spiritually asphyxiated and his whole being needs to be recuperated.

We can never be satisfied:

- If 1 out of every 3 black men are in prison or in correctional supervision.
- If 1 out every 9 black children have a parent in prison.
- If 1 out of 28 Hispanic and 1 out of every 52 white children have a parent in prison.
- If over 5 million children have a parent in prison.
- If they continue to build prisons based on children in the 3rd and 7th grades in our inner school systems.
- If the system has more confidence in our children going to prison than getting an education.

- If on any given day over 500,000 fathers are in prison.
- If on any given day over 200,000 mothers are in prison.
- If the education would rather to send a child to In School Suspension (ISS) or kick them out on the streets rather than to deal with behavioral issue.
- If the system continues to spend 5 times more on the prison budget than the education budget.
- If 76.6 percent of our returning citizens recidivate in 3 to 5 years.

Challenge: The clarion call to the church in Matthew 25 is for the church to assume an aggressive posture to cross reach into the lives of correctional residents and returning citizens to teach them how to live positive Christian lives. Jesus admonishes us not to sit idle in a cobweb of silence. Silence is violence. Prison ministry is not confined to going behind the walls. Most of prison ministry is done outside of the prison walls. Such as:

- Transitional Housing
- Van Ministries to transport families to the prison for visitation
- Toiletry Ministries – assembling personal hygiene kits for indigent correctional residents
- Clothing Ministries – for returning citizens
- Angel Tree Ministries – for children of correctional residents
- Support Groups for families of correctional residents
- Prayer Ministries for prison ministry workers
- Providing literature for prison ministry workers to use in the ministry
- Pen Pal Ministry – corresponding with correctional residents.

These are examples that clearly portray that every church member can engage in prison ministry. Retention and stabilization are tantamount in helping ex-offenders to reintegrate back into society.

Adopting Jesus' Method of Ministry:

- He mingles with the unwanted and despised.
- In Luke 5:27 – 32 Jesus indicates that it is the sick people which includes correctional residents who need the **“Medicine of Salvation.”**
- He suggests that correctional residents as well as returning citizens need the healing power that is inherent in the gospel.

- He indicates that we are not to look at those who have made criminal mistakes with contempt but as someone who needs love and help to synchronize their will with the will of God.
- Jesus fellowshiped with those of whom the Pharisees would not allow to touch the beads of their robes. He friendly engaged with those around Him and because He was friendly, He built relationships. They not only trusted Him but they accepted Him.
- He taught us to look beyond predicaments and to look at potentials. (David, Moses, Paul etc.)
- Please remember that an offender's past is not his destiny.

In our ministry to offenders we must lay aside prejudice, preconceived ideas, and judgmental attitudes. We must help them overcome their spiritual, physical, and emotional challenges. When they are members of our congregations, do not make them advertising boards. Involve them in the ministry of the church. Inclusion creates in them a sense of belonging. Avoid doctrinal overloads, just love, and nurture them and let the Holy Spirit do His job. Refrain from "deistic nurturing"- that is- do not start nurturing and subsequently treat the returning citizen like winding up a watch and leaving him/her to grow their own. God needs YOU to provide the nurturing.

Jesus, our high priest, experienced the journey of the marginalized. He met the injustices of His day having to deal with a rotten Supreme Court called the Sanhedrin Council. Our Savior was tried in a kangaroo court stacked with false witnesses, He was persecuted and prosecuted by Satanic judges. Tortured, beaten, spit on, slapped, skin lacerated from whips, derided, and degraded by cruel police officers and security guards. Brought before Pilate Circuit Court Judge and Herod the Governor who knew that He was innocent but instead of doing what was right they were swayed by law and order from a litigious society.

Pilate could find no reason to convict Jesus because He was faultless. He offers a plea bargain by offering Barabbas instead of Jesus to be sentence to death. Satanic injustice prevailed and Jesus was sentenced to death in the first degree. A cruel cross was placed upon His back. He was sentence like the vilest offender in the Roman system of government. Nailed to an old, rugged cross out on Golgotha. Suspended in the air between two thieves. Hanging between two thieves on death row he commutes the sentence of a prisoner in

his dying hour. The last ministry that Jesus did while on earth was Prison Ministry. This was an intentional ministry because He did not want us to put this ministry on the backburner. He wanted it to be like frontlets before our eyes and burn in our hearts. He said in Isaiah 58:6 “Is not this the fast that I have chosen to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free and to break every burden...?”

Today’s question is; If your position in life was reversed to the least of these, how would you want to be treated? Perhaps a more gut-wrenching question is, do I want the Lord to say because I neglected him when he was in prison, depart from me you worker of iniquity, I never knew you.

Prayer: Lord, help us to be faithful stewards in your vineyard. Soon YOU are going to walk out of the heavenly sanctuary and throw down the golden sensor and pronounce that the eternal proclamation in Revelation 22:11 “He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy let him be filthy still; he who is righteous let him be righteous still; he who is holy let him be holy still.” Lord, put an end to all jails and prison likeness and usher in an oasis of peace and joy where sin shall never rise again. Amen

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