

Why Prison Ministry?

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In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands us to "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations." Whether we obey that command by witnessing to neighbors, co-workers, or strangers, *who* we evangelize is not important. What matters is *that* we are evangelizing, because that is how the Lord uses us to build His church.

As a prison chaplain, I have devoted my life to jail ministry. Years ago I discovered that prison inmates are a field ripe for the harvest. Many of them have hit bottom, ruined their families, and wrecked their lives. When I am proclaiming the gospel to someone outside of jail, I often have to start by convincing that person of the reality of sin. Generally that is not the case with inmates. For the most part, they know they have sinned. If they forget that fact, they have an orange jumpsuit to remind them.

Throughout my life I've known people who were very successful by the world's standards, with money in the bank, prosperity, extravagant cars, and all of the "toys" one could imagine. But I've also noticed that without Jesus, they are missing true and transforming joy. In contrast, jail ministry has given me the opportunity to meet men behind bars who have lost everything—family, relationships, and worldly possessions—but the Lord used their circumstances to humble them and lead them to faith. In the words of one 40-year-old inmate serving a life sentence, "I would rather spend the rest of my life behind bars knowing Jesus than be back on the outside without Him."

This man understands what Jesus meant in Mark 8:36–37 when he asked, "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?" This attitude is not unusual behind bars. Inmates have a lot of time to think, and they often ask serious introspective questions like "Why did my life go this way?" or "What is the point of living when jail is going to be my life?" People who ask these kinds of questions often have hearts prepared to receive the good news of the gospel.

The reality is that the world is filled with people who are enslaved to sin. They have chains on their souls, because their lives have been given over to the deeds of the flesh. Just because they manage to keep man-made laws and avoid prison does not mean they are truly free.

John 8:36 tells us that only those who have the Son are "free indeed." So if the Lord uses prison to get someone's attention and introduce them to the gospel, then so be it. If a person's soul is set free from the power of sin and death, it doesn't matter if their body remains behind bars. This powerful truth is perhaps what motivated Paul to say, "I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned" (2 Timothy 2:9).

While it may seem ironic that jails are one of the most fruitful places for evangelism, it actually makes perfect sense. A traveling businessman may witness to the person sitting next to him on the plane, but the demands of work and the allure of sleep make it difficult. A housewife may

strike up conversations with neighbors, but the demands of life can make the conversations rushed and distracted. This is not the case with prison ministry.

Jails are full of people with lots of time and little distraction. They come to Bible study, church services, or Fundamentals of the Faith classes curious and looking for answers. They are often desperate and broken, and the Lord has used their circumstances to prepare them to receive the gospel. It seems like every week someone behind bars asks me, "What must I do to be saved?" Answering that question is the biggest joy of my life.

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