

Lock'em Up...

The popular solution to crime is to "lock 'em up and throw away the key." A spirit of fear grips the hearts of people, while legislatures pass tougher laws each year in response to those fears. Many hide in their homes, hoping that crime does not strike them and not sure what to do. The police say the penal system is not working. A large percentage of our population favors being tough on crime and strict enforcement of the death penalty.

More executions took place in the United States in the '90s and early 2000s than at any other time in the past half-century. Several hundred of the nation's 5000 plus death row inmates were executed, including women. This is the most since seventy-six were put to death in 1955. The pace of executions has slowed down because of the inability to obtain lethal-injection drugs. Foreign drug companies have refused to sell drugs being used for executions to United States prisons for moral reasons. Other options have been found, allowing state and federal executions to pick up again.

On the other hand, prison populations have gotten out of control. In California alone, the prison system had grown from 19,000 inmates in 1970, to 29,000 in 1980, to over 150,000 in recent years. In the United States, there are more than 2 million prisoners. We have almost twice as many people on parole or probation – supervised release. The costs are staggering.

The Incorrect Solution

The problem is that as we have gotten tougher on crime, crime has gotten tougher on us. Our leaders keep searching for better solutions to the crime problem. The correct solution is spiritual.

We must learn to overcome our fears and open our minds to solutions we have not considered. We need to recognize that we have a great responsibility to do more than just "be tough on crime."

The solution pendulum has swung back and forth between rehabilitation to increased punishment and back for the past half-century. The '70s ended a policy of rehabilitation in favor of punishment (CA Penal Code 1170) by increasing sentences. In the 1990s, strict laws and draconian enhancements served to expand the time an inmate serves to impossible proportions. As efforts failed to rehabilitate through education, self-help and mental health programs, the only solution left appeared to be maximum punishment. This practice has continued as our prison populations and the resulting budget has soared out of control. Now, in the 2020s, we are finally beginning to see the pendulum swing back as we discover the value of true rehabilitation, economically and morally.

Justice vs. Chastisement...

Our leaders are now searching for better solutions to the crime problem. In the past few decades, justice has been controlled by cries for more punishment fueled by the desire for vengeance. Victims today say they want "closure." But since they appear to only be satisfied through more severe punishment of criminals, a "desire for closure" becomes the new desire for vengeance.

"The 'punisher' is a hard-hearted task master fueled by bitterness and anger. His or her destructive actions have been justified by an overwhelming sense of injustice and a need for recompense" (Supernatural Power of Forgiveness, by Kris and Jason Vallotton).

People retaliating with vengeance is not true justice. Vengeance is the natural response to the vindictive nature of fallen man. Only God can fix man's sinful nature. This is especially true in the age of grace. The Lord God says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay" (Deuteronomy 32:35, Romans 12:17-21, NKJV).

The dictionary meaning of justice is fairness, righteousness and the administration of what is just (by assigning merited reward or punishment). Biblically, punishment that lacks mercy is defined as vengeance. But justice comes into balance in the New Testament in light of the Cross of Jesus Christ. God's justice and mercy were satisfied on the cross when Jesus took our punishment for sin. If it had not been for Christ, justice would have demanded the death penalty for us all: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23, NKJV).

Those crying out for vengeance don't know God's justice, which includes His grace and mercy. His expression of love for all mankind includes those in prison. Vengeance nullifies the sacrifice Christ made for us.

What's Lacking?

What's lacking is chastisement, which completes the meaning of justice, carried out with grace and mercy. The purpose is correction and restoration. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) said: "...let your indignation against their crimes be tempered by considerations of humanity: be not provoked by the atrocity of their sinful deeds to gratify the passion of revenge, but rather be moved by the wounds which these deeds have inflicted on their own souls to exercise a desire to heal them" ("Duties of the Clergy - Book II", in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Buffalo, NY: The Christian Literature Co. 1895, Pgs. 470-471).

Chastisement suggests training [bringing to maturity] with grace, which brings reproof, admonishment and healing. As a result, one becomes disciplined, which can change one's character so he can live in society. This is opposed to rejection and expulsion from society. To bring chastisement into our penal system means accepting the Bible's God and His grace. To do this, we must not misinterpret the first amendment's so-called "separation of church

and state." The church is intended to be protected from the State, not the State from the church. The intention of the amendment was never to kick God out of our schools and prisons. Instead, we are to invite Him to solve this dilemma.

The prophet Micah wrote: "He has shown you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, NKJV).

What's Missing?

The missing factor in the childhood of many prisoners is an understanding of God's love. There may have been love present in the home, but no true expression of God's unconditional love through an emotional touch or hugs, caring relationships and respect. Children will be less likely to fail when parents practice discipline with love and grace. This will encourage their gifts and talents to grow because they have a stable disciplined foundation.

Many prisoners experienced only a form of punishment during childhood. Many of their parents did not know God, so in all likelihood, they were never properly trained to live in our society. Their childhood continues in prison now. They are being punished repeatedly without any defects of character getting changed.

Not only are there missing factors at home, but in our schools. Today, all Biblical principles have been replaced by humanistic programs. Since prayer was removed from our schools in the '60s, we have seen the rebellion of our youth spread like wildfire through our society. As a result, the children have grown up rejecting God, with no understanding of sin. These children become the criminals and prisoners we are left with. But there is hope.

Our Responsibility...

We share the responsibility for the problems we see in our world. Just as prisoners are expected to take full responsibility for their crimes, we must all recognize our shortcomings and failures in this life. It is time for a change, and our leaders in authority have the greatest responsibility, that is, to train those in their care. But if they don't know God and have not trained their own souls and families, how can we expect them to train our prisoners?

Since most were raised without fathers, prisoners need examples, those who reach out to help, showing love and mercy. Let us be thankful for the changes we see in corrections and pray for God's wisdom to move in their lives as they humble themselves to Him.

Most prisoners have yielded to drugs in order to medicate the pain caused by sin (some call it character defects). But in reality, many in society are imprisoned with the same bondage and vices, but they haven't been caught. Until we receive the healing power that Jesus offers, we won't be truly compassionate toward the pain of others, especially prisoners and victims of crime. It takes the power

of the Holy Spirit to reveal that Jesus took our punishment for sin and pain upon Himself at the cross (Isa. 53:3-6).

Now is the time for those who know God and have their own house in order, to reach out to those in prison. We must take our authority in Christ and go forth carrying out our responsibility as the Body of Christ. Eventually, each of us will know a prisoner; a son, daughter, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin, nephew, niece or friend. Will we treat them with fear and rejection or with compassion and mercy?

The Real Solution...

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the solution to the crime problem. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. "All glory to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by shedding his blood for us" (Revelation 1:5c, NLT). His death, burial and resurrection give life to those in bondage through being born again by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:11). His grace enables us to share His righteousness, triumphing over sin and death through Christ (Romans 5:17).

The Body of Christ has the responsibility to bring restoration to the prisoner. Mankind, in general, has left God, but for us, the Lord says: "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (II Chronicles 7:14, NKJV). We are the people of God, called to humble ourselves. We must pray, seek God's face, and turn from our wicked ways. Forgiveness and healing will come to our land as a result.

The Body of Christ has work to do. We can't wait for the penal system to change. Instead, our attitude toward the criminal must change. Many of us have taken on the attitude of the unsaved when it comes to crime. As Christians, we are to hate sin but love the sinner by reaching out with grace and mercy. Fear is not to overcome us, but the Spirit of love, so we are empowered to minister to those in prison. "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind" (II Timothy 1:7, NKJV).

Just as the prisoner is expected to take responsibility for his sin, the Body of Christ must take responsibility for its lack of compassion for those in prison. We must rebuke the fear and reach out to the prisoner with the Gospel message of restoration.

What Must We Do?

The Body of Christ is the healing agent for all the problems in this world. We must come out from behind our walls and comfort zones to reach the lost. Each one of us as individuals must do our part. Most Christians don't want anything to do with a prisoner, especially one who has committed horrible crimes.

The late Charles Colson, founder of Prison Fellowship said, "...Our churches are basically evangelical churches and church

membership is basically white, middle or middle to upper class, and they tend to be conservative. They equate conservative theology with conservative politics." This attitude is changing. No matter what your political affiliation, we must humble ourselves and let God's love and grace flow through our lives for real solutions to occur.

The work of prison ministry is misunderstood by most. This attitude must change. Those who have lined themselves up with the majority of mankind, who have hardened their hearts and aligned themselves to the dictates of this world, must repent. It is time to pray and seek the face of God. Begin by praying for the victims of crime and the victims' families. But also pray for the prisoners who have caused so much pain to others and for their families who suffer with them.

The victim has been a catalyst to propel the justice system into retaliation. Let us pray for wisdom to see that these efforts have only caused the crime problem to increase. Pray for our leaders in authority, prison administrators, the legislature, the governors and the President of our nation (I Timothy 2:1-7).

What Can You Do?

Thank God for the many volunteers going into our prisons today. We are called to go into the world, not only outside our country but inside our prison walls. Prisoners are a lonely bunch. They need friends, especially brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ. They need your love and compassion. As the rejects of society, many have nobody to care and no place to go when released. And make no mistake, most of the prisoners will be released. "God places the lonely in families; He sets the prisoners free and give them joy. But He makes the rebellious live in sun-scorched land" (Psalm 68:6, NLT).

As the Body of Christ, we must go into the prisons so that the prisoner will be part of our world when released. Our prisoners need to be saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Spirit. We are one big family, all heaven-bound in a short time. Most of the great men of the Bible were arrested and spent time in prison – Moses, Paul and even Jesus.

Many of you don't have the opportunity to go personally into prison chapels to preach the Gospel, yet you may be called to visit one-on-one and make a disciple. You can go in other ways: helping others with your gifts; supplying teaching materials, ALMS web pages and brochures for prisoners and chaplains; volunteering with a pen pal ministry and especially praying for those who minister to prisoners.

Regardless of what you are called to do, ACT TODAY! Your acts of love brings restoration to prisoners and your participation helps to solve the crime problem. Your efforts could turn the penal system right side up.



STOP CRIME GOD'S WAY

*Message from a former
Manson Family member...*

In these last days, mankind is experiencing one of the greatest crime waves in history, especially in our schools and cities. The Scriptures say, "...in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money.

"They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good.

"They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that." (2 Timothy 3:1-5, NLT)

Our prisons overflow with men and women with the traits described in these verses. Our streets are full of people heading for prison who commit crimes that stem from deep-spiritual problems.

Charles D. Watson
www.aboundinglove.org