

PRISON MINISTRY

SHARING JESUS WITH PEOPLE IMPACTED BY INCARCERATION

WINTER 2023 NEWSLETTER



THOSE IN PRISON ARE IMPORTANT TO JESUS

Pastor James Behringer, Special Ministries Director

Recently someone asked, “Why was prison such a big deal to Jesus and early Christians?” I was startled by the question, because I didn’t think that incarceration was a particularly significant issue of that time. Prisons in those days were generally a place to hold people until a case was decided and then, if punishment was imposed the person was killed, beaten, or fined. The Roman government and others at that time did not impose a prison sentence as a penalty for a crime. Life sentences were unknown.

I also didn’t think that Jesus made a “big deal” out of incarceration. When I think of the messages of the New

Testament—justification by faith, salvation by grace, mercy for sinners, and condemnation of work righteousness—those could be called “big deal” messages.

But a discussion of Christ’s words in Matthew 25 about Judgment Day prompted the question about prison. If we didn’t have these words of Jesus about the Last Day, we might picture the Judge railing angrily against the murderers, robbers, rapists, and other evil people when he judges the world. Instead, Jesus tells us that the Judge will condemn those who don’t feed the hungry or the stranger, give drinks to the thirsty, clothe the naked, or visit the sick and imprisoned.

Books could be written about Matthew 25, but what struck this person was that Jesus included visiting prisoners in the list of things people will be accountable for at the Judgment. The New Testament also commanded God’s people, “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison.” (Hebrews 13:3) Clearly the Lord has not forgotten the prisoner, even if the world has.



**CLEARLY THE LORD HAS NOT
FORGOTTEN THE PRISONER,
EVEN IF THE WORLD HAS.**

We should not be surprised, then, that Christian churches have had prison ministries down through the centuries. Like food pantries, visits to the homebound, and hospitals (a Christian invention), Christians have found ways to organize resources and people to care for others in their need. You may not be visiting an inmate – you may be supporting jail ministry with your resources. In your prayers, remember prisoners and those who bring them the good news.

“VERY HELPFUL. AS AN INMATE SEEKING TO FIND HIS PLACE, I’VE BEEN GRABBING A HOLD OF ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING THAT RESEMBLES LIGHT. I’M FILLING MY TIME WITH STUDIES, THE WORD AND CHAPEL SERVICES. I ENJOY THESE STUDIES AND PRAY YOU CONTINUE TO SEND MORE. THANK YOU AND GOD BLESS YOU.” – MICHAEL

Sometimes we have an opportunity to show the love of Jesus personally. If someone from your family, your church, or your community is incarcerated, send them a card or note, and say a prayer for them. These are men and women for whom Christ died. Whether they are incarcerated unfairly (as Jesus and Paul were), or whether they are getting the punishment they deserve (like the thief on the cross), the Lord has not forgotten about them.

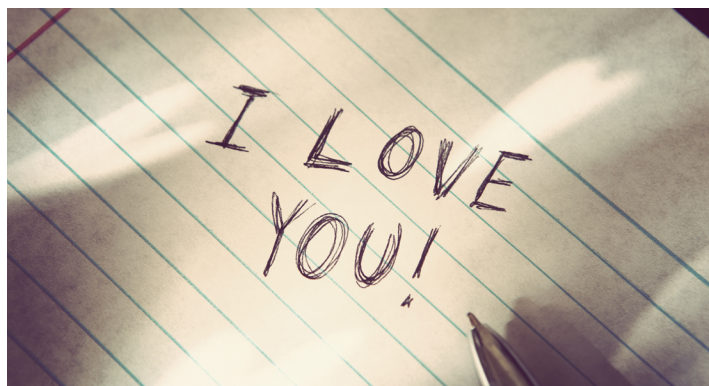
In a world that regards money as the solution for most problems, Christians are tempted to think that sending money to the incarcerated is showing love. The love of Jesus is so much more than money, and grace is so different from the material goods that money provides. Remember Peter’s priorities with the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:6) where he didn’t give him any money but spoke to him in the name of Jesus. Isn’t the greatest gift eternal life? Isn’t the rarest blessing for an inmate to experience the love of Christ?

Prison is a big deal to Jesus. So is sickness. So is sin. As his followers, we reflect his compassionate priorities in whatever opportunities he puts before us. Thank you for your partnership in serving those who are incarcerated and remember them in your prayers.

FURTHER EVIDENCE OF CHANGING TIMES

A recent *Star Tribune* (Minneapolis) article underscores changes in the field of corrections regarding how mail is delivered to inmates. The article, titled “Paper and Ink Spelling Trouble,” chronicles some changes that are being pilot tested and debated in Minnesota and elsewhere. The objective of the procedural changes is to reduce the influx of liquid drug formulations dripped onto the paper of a letter, magazine, or other item mailed to an inmate. The correctional facility in Stillwater, Minn., is experimenting with photocopying all inmate mail and delivering the copies to the inmate. But there are drawbacks. The reporter states: “In Stillwater, this test is adding hours of work for [a correctional officer] while creating an extra, even if temporary, barrier for inmates relying on photos, greeting cards, and letters to stay tethered to loved ones in the outside world.”

The article continues: “‘It depersonalizes,’ said Michele Livingston, whose son, Jeffrey Young, is serving a life sentence for murder in Stillwater. ‘Already there is no contact, and mail is actually one of the best ways to communicate with someone incarcerated. It tells them it took effort and time to say something to them. Now when you get photocopies, it takes it away.’”



So, in good Lutheran fashion, “What does this mean?” There are several take-aways for us. One is a reminder to “work while it is day,” that is, make the most of opportunities to spread the gospel because those opportunities can evaporate. Doing our ministry by U.S. mail has worked well for more than 30 years, but that era may be changing.

A second take-away is the continual need to innovate and develop new ways to deliver the gospel. WELS

Prison Ministry has a team working on developing viable methods for delivering pen pal letters and our Bible studies as well as receiving tests and returning them to inmates using electronic delivery. Please pray for blessings on this team's efforts.

Finally, the article renews our conviction that the spiritual and emotional encouragement we provide through pen pal letters and test comments are personally vital to the inmates despite any photocopying. The Word of God works, even if it is photocopied first.

NEW TOOL FOR CONGREGATIONS: HOPE FOR THE HURTING

WELS Special Ministries Director Rev. Jim Behringer is pleased to announce a new Bible class, Helping the Hurting with Hope, that will assist congregations in developing a climate of compassion for sinners served by ministries such as WELS Prison Ministry. Using some of the same themes as our opening article, the study's author seeks to help participants see the vital role of compassion in a Christian's personal and congregational life. He also seeks to provide the gospel motivation for participants to go beyond their comfort zones and act in compassionate ways through the Spirit's power.

We believe Helping the Hurting with Hope can motivate God's people to be patient and wise with people behind bars and those formerly incarcerated when returning to the community. Where the Bible class succeeds in cultivating compassion, church families will also be better spiritual refuges for others with broken lives.

The study comprises an introductory lesson with a video and four additional lessons. The participant's lessons, leader's guide, and video can all be accessed or downloaded at welscongregationalservices.net/modules/compassion-ministry-modules.



CORRECTOR'S CORNER – HANDLING INMATE COMMENTS

Generally, our correctors are very faithful at adding some encouraging comments to tests submitted by inmates. However, in some cases we'd like to see more direct acknowledgment, when appropriate, by the corrector of requests or other notes from the inmate. This is especially true if the inmate asks for prayer or notes some aspect of struggling to live for Jesus, but other comments can be worth responding to as well. For example, an inmate recently submitted: "Thank you for this course. It's been helpful to me to control my depression and anxiety. I'm in a place where these feelings can control. I will look back on this book in my time of need." While not an explicit request for prayer, this is a situation that lends itself to an encouragement along the lines of "[First name]: I'm thankful this study helped direct you to places in God's Word that reassure you when you're tempted to be anxious or depressed. I pray that you will continue to find comfort in those verses as you seek to trust Jesus' promises."

Also, we wanted to note that a significant number of our students are in county jails where their stays may be limited. Those tests are especially time-sensitive, and we'd like to get them back to the students as soon as possible before they are released or move on. Please return corrected tests as soon as you can, but no more than two weeks at the most.

"I WANT TO THANK YOU GOOD PEOPLE FOR HELPING NOT ONLY ME, BUT ALL OTHERS. THESE COURSES ARE HELPING FOLKS TO BE BETTER, STRONGER CHRISTIANS. THANKS SO MUCH. GOD BLESS." – JASON

WELL DONE, FAITHFUL SERVANT

In a recent newsletter we reported that one of our volunteers, Elisabeth Newell, was still actively serving at age 100. We just learned that the Lord took Betty home in January. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord!"

"I ABSOLUTELY LOVE THESE BIBLE STUDIES AND HAVE LEARNED SO MUCH FROM THEM. I TOLD MY CHAPLAIN HERE ABOUT THEM SO SHE COULD ADD THEM TO THE LIST OF BIBLE STUDIES. THANK YOU SO MUCH! GOD BLESS!" – ANGELA

To get WELS Prison Ministry news and updates delivered straight to your inbox, subscribe at wels.net/subscribe.

THREE WAYS TO SUPPORT OUR MINISTRY

- 1. Pray** – As God's redeemed children, our prayers are powerful and effective. Current prayer requests: for blessings on our outreach efforts to new facilities; for the success of our electronic document team efforts; for blessings on the second and subsequent mentor training classes and new mentor ministries; for continued designated gifts to fund all our ministry activities.
- 1. Serve** – All our ministry efforts are driven by volunteers motivated by Christ's love.
 - To volunteer as a pen pal, please contact us at prisonministry@wels.net or 507-354-3130.
 - To explore jail visitation or post-release mentoring opportunities, call 414-256-3243 or send an e-mail to dave.hochmuth@wels.net.
- 2. Give** – We thank our Lord and you for your helpful special offerings to Prison Ministry, which support our efforts to share Jesus with people impacted by incarceration!
 - To provide additional gifts for Christ's work through Prison Ministry:

**WELS, Attn. Gift Processing
N16W23377 Stone Ridge Drive
Waukesha, WI, 53188**

(Make checks payable to WELS and list Prison Ministry in the memo line.)
 - Donate online at wels.net/donate-prison-ministry.
 - Give through your IRA charitable distribution, appreciated assets, or your will or estate plan. Contact WELS Ministry of Christian Giving at 800-827-5482 for assistance.
 - Direct your Thrivent Choice dollars (if you are a Thrivent member) to WELS Prison Ministry. Contact Thrivent Member Care Services at 800-847-4836 for assistance. Your 2022 designation is due by March 31, 2023.