

Remembering Prisoners • Hebrews 13:13

Recently I sat at the kitchen table of a pastor friend in a large U.S. city as he shared with me a sad and tragic story of a prominent church family in the church where he ministers. The 17-year-old son from this family was working at a job mowing large sections of lawn, apparently near a highway. Two grade-school boys walked by and started talking to him. At some point, he took these two boys to a wooded area nearby and molested both of them.

A few hours later, he was arrested by the police and was charged with first-degree sexual assault. The story was picked up by the local newspaper in that city and was covered on the front page.

I couldn't help but think about all the lives that have been hurt by this terrible act. It's difficult to imagine the trauma that must have taken place in that family. It has probably torn at the very essence of what holds that family together. How do the parents get up in the morning? How do they relate to their son? What drove that teenager to commit such a dreadful act?

My heart ached for the children that were assaulted and for their families. I wondered how you ever make any kind of good out of such circumstances.

This has been a difficult time for the church, as well. A prominent family, a young man involved in the ministry of the church, all the publicity, all the difficulty that has gone with this.

What if something like this happened to one of our families? Suppose the people we know and with whom we are friends were involved in this story? What kind of reaction would we have? Would we greet the parents when we saw them at church, or might we be tempted to avoid them and not enter into any conversation at all?

How would we treat that young man when he walked into the church building? Who would sit next to him? How would we handle it as a church and as friends and acquaintances?

If there were a trial and publicity and sentencing and imprisonment, how would we handle hav-

ing one of our church members in prison? Would we write letters or visit? Over the months and the years of serving a prison sentence, would we maintain contact with him?

In Matthew 25 Jesus said that he equates the way we treat prisoners and the way we relate to them as comparable with our treatment of him and the way we relate to him.

On a trip to Ireland, Pope John Paul once gave a public speech in which he spoke about prisoners, and he had an interesting observation. The Pope noted that never in the Bible does it seem to make any difference whether a prisoner is guilty or innocent of the crime. The call is still to visit, to remember, to relate to and to be supportive of those who are in prison.

For most people who live in suburbia, there isn't much thought about prisoners because there is relatively little contact with prisons or prisoners. Unless there is a particular tragedy that affects our family, it is not likely that a day or a month or even a year goes by with any thought about those who are in prison. And yet, Hebrews 13:3 says, "Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

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"Remember" here means more than just "think about". It goes beyond that to mean that we are to "identify with". We are to keep prisoners in mind as though we were in prison with them.

Other than playing Monopoly, I've never been in jail. In fact, I try most of the time when playing Monopoly to be in the "Just Visiting" part. So I can only imagine what it's like from the reports of other people. But I imagine that there is a sharp contrast between my life and the life of someone in prison.

My days are busy and full and comfortable. And they're seemingly short. Sometimes it stuns me how quickly the days go by. But, in prison, I would imagine that the days are anything but busy. They must seem long and dreary. It must seem as if every week is a year and every year is an eter-

nity.

My life, perhaps yours also, is filled with comforts that border on luxury. I live in a lovely home, have a fine family, have many conveniences and have plenty of good food that I can eat any time I want. Life is comfortable. In comparison to just about all the rest of the world's population outside of the United States, I live like a king.

I think of those behind bars as experiencing discomforts and violence and loneliness and regimentation and lack of freedom. It must be awful to be closed behind bars day after day and night after night for year after year, sometimes without any prospect of freedom ever again. For others, when the prospect of freedom becomes a reality, the outside world is so intimidating and so terribly different that it's too frightening to step into.

At the same time, we need to recognize that we live in a sinful world with crime and violence and aggression, and, as a society, we must deal with those realities. As part of the sinful world in which we live, we must recognize that punishment and prison are necessary evils.

We have more prisoners in the United States than we have ever had at any point in our history. Overcrowding in our prisons is common. Chuck Colson says that the majority of prisoners in the United States today have been convicted of non-violent crimes. Many times our prisons are counter-productive because, when people are released, they are worse off than when they went in and have not been rehabilitated at all. Many people are in prison for crimes they did commit. Whatever the reason for being there, the clear teaching of the Bible is that they must not be forgotten. Like the early church, we must take very seriously the instruction of Hebrews 13:3 to remember prisoners.

Let me give you some quotes. The first was from a man named Aristides. Aristides was anything but a Christian. He was probably one of the greatest classic orators of ancient Greece, and he was a heathen of the first order. Yet he was aware of Christianity. In one of his great speeches, he spoke of Christians saying, "If they hear that any of their number is imprisoned or in distress for the sake of their Christ's name, they all render aid in his necessity. And if he can be redeemed, they set him free." The mark of Christians in the early centuries was their concern and action on behalf of prisoners.

Prisons in those days were often very different from ours. Some had cells that were pathetically overcrowded, some were dungeons where prisoners were severely tortured. More often than not, long-term prison sentences in the early centuries of the church were exacted in mines, in remote areas or in exile to distant islands. The Apostle John was imprisoned on the island of Patmos when he wrote the Book of Revelation.

What did the church do? Well, the Apostolic Constitution, another early Christian document, says, "If any Christian is condemned for Christ's sake to the mines by the ungodly, do not overlook him but from the proceeds of your toil and sweat save him something to support himself and to reward the soldier of Christ." And they did it.

When the Numidians took captives from Carthage in North Africa, the people from the Church of Carthage gave thousands and thousands of dollars in order to pay a ransom and set them free.

Some Christians in the Roman Empire even went so far as to sell themselves into slavery so that they could get brothers and sisters in Christ out of jail by paying their debts.

By the fourth century, early Christians became well known for bribing prison guards so that they could get into prison and help the prisoners there. This got so out of hand that the Emperor Licinius passed legislation that made it illegal "to show kindness to sufferers in prison by supplying them with food, and no one was to show mercy to those starving in prison."

William Barclay, the Scottish writer, said that in the early days no Christian in trouble for his faith was ever neglected or forgotten by his fellow Christians.

The apparent assumption of the Holy Spirit in giving to us Hebrews 13:3 is that, when you are on the outside and when you're free, it's very easy to forget those who are on the inside and who have lost their freedom.

But, what about us? What are Christians doing today? Gratefully, I can report that Christians are doing a lot and have a great deal of concern for those behind prison bars. Chuck Colson, former counsel to President Richard Nixon, has been instrumental in beginning and enlarging the ministry of Prison Fellowship. Today there are thousands of Christians nationwide who are caring for inmates

in hundreds of federal, state, county and municipal prisons.

In the state of Minnesota alone, there are hundreds of Christians who are specifically involved in Prison Fellowship ministries of all kinds – visiting prisoners, writing letters, ministering to their families and helping ex-offenders return to outside society, all in the name of Jesus Christ.

Floyd Pinotti is the director of Prison Fellowship for Minnesota and the Dakotas. He says that “an increased number of people are willing to spend time going into prisons, writing to prisoners, helping their families and sharing with ex-prisoners . . . The people who open their homes as host families, the people that visit, the people that are involved in prayer-chains . . . tell me that they receive more than they give.”

Most of us are not going to write to prisoners or go to jail to visit prisoners, but some of us should. Certainly, as a church family, we need to take seriously the clear commandment of the Bible to do something.

But, perhaps this is the ministry that God has laid on your heart and you’ll say, “I’ll do it. I’ll check it out and find out what I can do.”

God tells us to remember those who are in prison as though we were in prison with them. We are to imagine ourselves in that circumstance and we are to treat others accordingly. That’s the first part of the verse.

The second part of Hebrews 13:3 is to remember “those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” This is talking about all kinds of people: people who are hurting, who are suffering, who are in trouble. As Christians, we are called upon to be the friend of the oppressed. It may be starving people in sub-Saharan Africa. It may be those who are desperately poor in war-torn Central America or in Mexico; it may be oppressed citizens of Afghanistan or other countries; it may be the unemployed or the underemployed in our own metro area or in our own community or in our own church. It may be those who are broke or sick or hated or unwelcome or discriminated against. The idea is that if anyone is going to care, if anyone is going to be concerned, it ought to be Christians and the church of Jesus Christ.

But, that is a terribly broad principle. Is there

any way to narrow it down? Is there any way to prioritize our responsibility as Christians to those who are hurting throughout the world?

There is. Clearly, the instruction of the Bible, in 1 Corinthians 12:26 and elsewhere, is that we have a responsibility first to those who are Christians. “If one part (of the body of Christ, the church) suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.” So, we have a responsibility first of all to Christians, and then we have a broader concern and responsibility for people who are hurting no matter where they are.

We are given an interesting reason, in the end of Hebrews 13:3, to remember those who are mistreated. We’re to do it as if we ourselves are suffering. And, implicit in this is the idea that we, also, may face the same mistreatment and afflictions as the person to whom we minister.

There is an increasingly popular teaching that if someone is a Christian, that person ought to have trouble-free living. That teaching is not only unbiblical, it borders upon dangerous heresy. There are those who say: “Become a Christian and your problems will all disappear.” “Serve God and he will heap up for you material blessings galore. You will be wealthy beyond measure.” “Give to God and he will give back to you in such an abundance that it’s an investment that cannot be beat, no matter what your investment strategy.” “If you’re really

a person of faith, then you’ll never be sick. And, if you are sick, have enough faith and you will be healed.”

“If you are a child of the

King, you ought to live like a prince or princess—you ought to live like a king.”

There are some unfortunate results of this unbiblical teaching. When things go wrong, there can be an inaccurate assumption that this is a result of lack of spirituality. If some tragedy strikes, if a child dies, or if I have some awful illness, then it is assumed that God is punishing me for some awful sin in my life. It’s hard sometimes to convince people that you can walk with the Lord and still have problems; yet that is exactly what the Bible teaches. Another part of it is that, when things go well, people sometimes come to the conclusion that it must be a reward from God for godliness.

Several years ago a Twin Cities businessman

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told me that the reason he was able to drive an expensive imported automobile was because of his godliness, that the two go hand in hand. The implication was that, if we all were that kind of Christian, we all would have expensive, imported automobiles.

If first century Christians could hear that kind of thinking, they would cringe because, to them, if you were affluent and comfortable, that was a warning sign that probably you were compromising with the world. You'd better watch out because you must not be serving God faithfully if you can get along with a society that is so committed to sinful ways. When they suffered, they actually got down on their knees and thanked God for that suffering. They thanked God for the opportunity to prove they were loyal to Jesus Christ.

The truth is that devout and godly Christians lose their jobs; devout and godly Christians have accidents and get cancer and go through divorces and have problems with their children; they suffer depression and struggle with the realities of life. The difference is not that we are exempt from mistreatment or problems or difficulties. The difference is that, in Jesus Christ, we have the strength, not just to persevere, but to be victorious. The difference is that we can stand tall as Christians, not because of our own strength, but because we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ and have the Holy Spirit indwelling and empowering us and making the difference in our lives.

Therefore, as Christians who understand that biblical teaching, we recognize that we, too, may face mistreatment and problems that others face. It is on that basis that we are told in the last half of Hebrews 13:3 to remember those who are mistreated. It's a reminder that we, too, are mortal; we, too, are vulnerable.

I had an elderly English uncle and aunt who

never had any children. They lived to a very old age and died of old age. I remember very well Uncle Herbert philosophizing one day about newborn babies. He said that the most amazing thing to him was that you could bring those babies home, and they work! They eat; they drink; they do all the things they're supposed to do.

And that's the most amazing thing of all about Christianity. Here we have the incredible revelation that God stepped down from heaven and took on human flesh, that he died on the cross for us, that he rose again to salvage us from the grips of hell and to give to us the promises of heaven. And, what's most amazing of all is that you bring it home, and it works. It works being a Christian. What the Bible teaches actually works in our jobs and in our homes and in our cars and in our lives and in our bodies.

How do we know it works? We know because we see it work. It works when we "remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering."

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