

PRISON MINISTRY AND THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIANITY

By Don Smarto

After recently preaching in a church about prison ministry, a college student said something that startled me. "I think prison ministry is good but you left out the exceptions." "*Exceptions?*" I inquired, "I don't understand?"

"Well", stated the student with conviction, "everyone knows there are certain crimes too bad to get to heaven."

I asked the crimes although I already predicted the answer. But I was most interested in his theological source.

The crimes were 1) Serial Killers and 2) Child Molesters (who killed their victims). Many in society, including those in churches, might well ratify these categories as "too far gone". But what really startled me was the student's source, his Sunday school teacher.

Criminals are the "enemy" of a civilized culture like America, so it stands to reason people think of them as "bad people" who deserve punishment, incarceration, and exile. After all, their sins are grave and offensive.

I believe that prison ministry brings believers to the core, the very heart of their faith. It begs two important questions: 1) Can the most wretched criminal be forgiven? and 2) Can God's power change them?

I am not suggesting we make light of a child molester's sins. I am not asking you to even like criminals, but let's look at God's Word. It says in Isaiah 55:7 "If the wretched will forsake his way and return to the Lord, He will have mercy upon him and our God will abundantly pardon."

We serve a God of justice and mercy! It is His universe, His rules. Through Jesus dying for our sins, all can be renewed, all can be saved, all can inherit the Kingdom of God.

It says in 2 Cor. 5:17 "A new life has begun...we are a new creation."

Now here is a key verse, Romans 10:13 "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." I take that verse at face value. Does "everyone" include child molesters? Yes, it does. If not, the verse would read "*Some* who call on the name of the Lord." Or "*might* be saved."

When people say someone is "Too far gone", or "Too bad", or "Beyond hope" or they have "Crossed a line" they limit God's power and they reduce the sacrifice on the cross to an act for an elite few.

If Jesus' death did not pay the price for the worst sin imaginable, then Jesus Christ did not pay the price for all sins, just some.

Look at Revelation 3:20 "Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hears my voice and opens the door." ... what will happen? "I will come in and fellowship with him." The redeemed serial killer? Yes! The forgiven child molester? Yes!

Did Jesus say "The child molester better not put his hand on that door knob?"

Now let me press my point. Jeffery Dahmer was one of the worst serial killers in recent history. He killed young men, put body parts in his fridge, and even ate some of his victims. Hard to get more grotesque than that, in fact, he had a demonic altar in his living room. While in prison he accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior. I heard

him repeat that confession several times in an NBC television interview. Could it be true? I cannot see into his heart but accept the fact it was possible. The Word says God forgives his sins by God's grace and mercy and Jeffery's confession and faith. In Matthew 9, Jesus responds to the Pharisees' indignation that Jesus is with "notorious sinners" in the home of Matthew. Jesus responds "The sick need a doctor, not the healthy...I have come for sinners not the self-righteous."

A lady once said to me (in a church) "If Jeffrey Dahmer is saved, I don't want to be in heaven with such bad people!"

How sad for her. She missed what Jesus was all about. Who is good? Even the best acts are like "filthy rags". Heaven is filled with nothing but bad people saved by God's grace.

John 3:16 says "Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." We quote this verse a lot, but do we understand the implications? Say it this way, "If Jeffrey believes in me, he will not perish but this former serial killer will have eternal life." That is what it means. No exceptions!

Church attenders often say "I am basically a good person. I have not killed anyone. I go to church. I tithe and give to charity. I read my Bible." So!?

These are good things but not the ticket to paradise. If we break one law are we not guilty of all the laws? We are all sinners. Our sins are not "good sins" and the criminal's sins the "bad sins". If God cannot reach into the heart of the most wretched person on earth and change him, then God's power is limited. In that case, He is not God.

But perhaps the real issue is bitterness. Think about it. "I have been a good, law abiding person my whole life, now some evil person wants into heaven at the last minute after years of rebellion", some will say. Remember the farmer in the parable that wanted to pay the same wages to workers in his field the last hour as those who toiled all day? Who grumbled? The eight hour workers were angry, of course. "It is not fair!" they protested. But God (like the farmer) is the boss. It is His rules and His money. The older brother was upset that his brother, the prodigal was foolish, now comes home and gets a party. Are we sometimes like the older brother?

A person in another church once asked me "How do you know prisoners who claim Jesus as Lord are not faking?" I responded "How do you know people in your church are not faking?" He was insulted. But, it is the same question. We know in time. We look for the "fruits of the Spirit."

The real issue is not making the criminal good enough, or moral enough, or contrite enough to be genuine. The only issue is: did he place his faith in Jesus? Some prisoners have never clearly heard the Gospel. Some have never been given the choice to accept or reject Jesus. That is why we have ministry to prisoners.

Finally, as a condemned prisoner coming to his senses said to Jesus "Remember me when you come into your Kingdom." Jesus responded "This day, you will be with me in Paradise!" A condemned prisoner is in heaven, for sure, on the authority of the Messiah. We cannot comprehend the depth of God's mercy. It is wide enough and deep enough to engulf a serial killer and a child molester. If you do not believe that, you are not operating from a Biblical world-view.
