

Being Part of the Church

Lesson 5: Ministering to Ex-Prisoners

Notes for the leader: This is the fifth and last in a series of lessons about "Being Part of a Church." It focuses on ways that a Christian inmate can use the spiritual gifts that God has given him (or her) while in prison, and gives some advice on how an ex-prisoner can use this experience to serve Christ and help others once he gets out.

Introduction

This series of lessons has emphasized that the most important thing a Christian inmate can do when he gets out is to become an accountable member of an effective Christian fellowship in his community. In previous lessons, we studied about the **spiritual gifts** that God gives **each person** who becomes a Christian "*for the common good*" (1 Corinthians 12:7). In other words, God gives us these gifts to **build up the Body of Christ** (the Church) (1 Corinthians 14:12).

Christian inmates need to begin developing their spiritual gifts right away -- **praying** with those who are mature in the faith to **help understand their gifts**, and being willing to **practice using their gifts** to **confirm their gifts** and to **learn how to use them**.

If you are a Christian, God wants you to **start using your spiritual gifts right where you are!** Those in prison know how desperately these gifts are needed inside the walls – **encouraging, showing mercy, and teaching**, among many others. **Use your gifts, starting now!**

But the main focus of this lesson is about using your spiritual gifts as part of a local church **when you get out**. In previous lessons, we have discussed some of the things you should look for when trying to find a church in your community: a church where they

- **teach sound doctrine**, based on the Bible, God's Word,
- **demonstrate God's love**, both inside their own fellowship and by reaching out to others,
- **work together** as a unified body, with **each member using the spiritual gifts** that God has given him or her for the good of the body.

You should **not** go looking for a church that is "**perfect.**" In fact, if the people in the church **don't seem to remember** that *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23), that's a real **danger sign!**

If you have never been part of a local church before, **you may not feel like you "fit in."** Some ex-prisoners feel very discouraged. The people in the church don't understand the struggles they are going through. If they talk about their prison experiences, **people may be frightened**, and back away. Please understand that **this is a reaction you should expect**. After all, the average church member has never been inside a prison. All they know about prison is what have seen on TV or in the movies. They don't understand the realities that prisoners must deal with:

- the **loneliness**, the **separation** from your family and loved ones, perhaps even the breakup of a marriage as a result of being in prison
- the **frustration** of prison rules and routine that tell you **what** you can do, and **when**
- the **hardness** that can come from being **unable to trust** anyone enough to share your real feelings
- the **temptations** to go back to the habits that got them into trouble in the first place

But **God has the power to use all of our experiences** -- whether good or bad -- **for His purposes** and

Romans 8:28

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Many people actively involved in ministry to prisoners and ex-prisoners are ex-prisoners themselves. God calls some ex-prisoners to **full-time prison ministry**. But many of you can offer to **help your local church minister to ex-prisoners**. How might you do this?

First, **pray about what God is calling you to do**. After you have been involved with a local church long enough for the pastor to know you fairly well, ask to talk with him about a **support ministry for ex-prisoners** within the church. Suggest that he ask some mature men -- elders of the church -- if they would be willing to lead a support group. Offer to help them, using your experience. If there is already a Christian twelve-step group in the church, this would be a good place to look for leaders and participants.

The support group might meet once a week or more, in a private area where they can talk freely. **The group should keep a “low profile,”** or some people may be afraid to participate. Referrals should come from the pastoral staff or from group members themselves.

There is great wisdom in a structure that includes mature Christian elders as well as people who have first-hand experience with the problems ex-prisoners face. The elders should have the spiritual **gift of discernment**, to know when people are acting from wrong motives. Based on their experience, **Christian ex-prisoners may recognize specific “danger signs”** based on their experiences, which they can bring to the attention of the elders. Together, you may be able to help a brother or sister grow in Christ and avoid falling back into sin.

Here are some principles that Paul gave to the Galatians that the group should keep in mind:

Galatians 6:1-5

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.

Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load.

Before our small group discussions, we need to cover one other area that many ministries to ex-prisoners have found to be very important: the **“One-Year Rule”**. This is related to the “low profile principle” for the group, but it applies to individuals: **avoid the “spotlight”** for at least a year!

The “One-Year Rule” says that **no ex-prisoner should give his testimony or speak about his experiences outside of the support group until he has been out at least a year with no significant stumbles**. In his excellent book, “Prison Ministry”, Lennie Spitale says, **“In over twenty-five years of prison ministry, I can honestly say that *without exception*, every ex-prisoner who has refused this counsel flaked out during their first year of freedom.”**

This is consistent with Paul's advice to Timothy about qualifications for putting someone in a church leadership position:

1 Timothy 3:6

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil.

It's also consistent with Paul's own experience. After his conversion on the road to Damascus (*Acts 9*), the apostles sent Paul first to Tarsus, and then to the local church in Antioch for at least a year, working quietly with other leaders before he was called to begin his major missionary journeys.

Notes for the leader: Hand out copies of the Small-Group Discussion Questions to each person. Depending on the size of the group, have them break into small groups of four to ten. Make sure that each group has a capable leader, who can keep the discussion moving and well-focused. Make sure the groups understand how much time they have. 15 minutes should be a minimum. 20 minutes is better. Give each group a time warning three or four minutes before they need to reassemble as a large group, so they can bring their discussion to an orderly conclusion.

Follow-up Discussion

Notes for the leader: The main purpose of the follow-up discussion is to make sure that each small group has grasped the main ideas of the study. You can skim quickly through the answers if it seems clear that everybody understands them. If not, pick a group that "got it" and have them explain the answers.

If circumstances permit, it's a good idea to walk around and listen to each group discussion so that you know who "got it" and who didn't.

1. What are some ways an ex-prisoner can help other ex-prisoners as part of a church-based support group?

Understanding ... friendship ... support ... advice ... prayer ... admonishing (carefully).

2. How does Paul say we should deal with a Christian brother (or sister) who becomes caught in sin? How can we do this?

“**Caught in a sin**” can mean “**trapped**,” like someone **tangled in a net** who can't get out. Paul says we need to help this person get untangled, but we must be **very careful not to get tangled ourselves**. This is especially true if we know the sin that has trapped this brother is a sin that tempts us, too!

3. What do we need to be careful about when we are helping a brother (or sister) caught in sin? How can working with church elders help avoid this problem?

It is wise to **work together with a pastor or elder** of the church when trying to help someone get untangled from a sin that is also a temptation for you. If the person **refuses to repent**, the pastor and elders may decide to exclude him from church activities to avoid the chance that his sinful actions may

4. In verse 2, Paul tells us to “carry each other’s burdens” and in verse 5, he says that “each one should carry his own load.” Is Paul contradicting himself? If not, what distinction is he making?

Paul tells us to help *carry each other’s burdens*. But he also reminds us that in the end, we are all responsible for our own actions -- *each one should carry his own load*. There seem to be a few people who in the church who believe that it's the responsibility of **other people** to keep them from sinning. That’s not what the Bible says, and we shouldn’t let them get away with that excuse!

As Paul said earlier (*1 Cor 5:10*), as long as we are living in a sinful world, **we can’t avoid dealing with sinful people. But we must not join them in their sin.** We must not associate ourselves with the way they live.

Sometimes a Christian ex-inmate sincerely wants to witness to those he knew in his “old life” -- only to have them drag him back into his old sins. If you feel called to help an old buddy, by all means **pray for him**. But **ask God** whether **you** are the one He wants to go back into the lion’s den. Then **ask yourself** whether **you’re trying to prove something** -- and **who** you’re trying to prove it to. To **yourself?** To **God?** To your **old buddies?** If your life has really changed, they’ll **know** it -- but some of them may try to pull you back into sin, trying to show that you’re no better than they are!

So, if you’re convinced God is really calling you to do something like this, **it’s very important to work with a pastor, an elder, or a strong and mature Christian brother who can watch for signs that you are falling into temptation** and pull you away, if necessary.

When a firefighter has to go in to a dangerous location, such as a burning building, he uses all the safety equipment available – fire resistant coat, helmet, face shield, breathing mask with air tank, and so forth. But he also wears a harness with a steel cable hooked to it. His brother firefighters carefully manage this cable so that if he gets into real trouble, they can pull him back out. You need to follow the same process whenever you head into a spiritually dangerous situation. You need to be wearing the "armor of God" (*Ephesians 6:10-18*) – and you need to have spiritually mature people that you trust hanging on to a spiritual cable that can pull you back if you get into trouble.

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Ministering to Ex-Prisoners (*Galatians 6:1-5*)

1. What are some ways an ex-prisoner can help other ex-prisoners as part of a church-based support group?
2. How does Paul say we should deal with a Christian brother (or sister) who becomes caught in sin? How can we do this?
3. What do we need to be careful about when we are helping a brother (or sister) caught in sin? How can working with church elders help avoid this problem?
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Take-home Thoughts About ...

Ministering to Ex-Prisoners

If you are a Christian, God wants you to **use your spiritual gifts right where you are!** Those in prison know the desperate need for the gifts of **encouraging, showing mercy, and teaching.**

When you get out, God wants you to **keep using your gifts.** If you have never been part of a local church before, **you may not feel like you “fit in..** If you talk about your prison experiences, **people may be frightened,** and back away. **This is a reaction you should expect.** The average church member doesn't understand the realities that prisoners must deal with. But **God has the power to use all of our experiences for His purposes** and for His glory.

Ask your pastor about forming a **support ministry for ex-prisoners.** Offer to help. **The group should keep a “low profile,”** or some people may be afraid to participate. The group must include mature, Christian elders as well as people who have first-hand prison experience. **Christian ex-prisoners may recognize specific “danger signs”** based on their experiences, which they can bring to the attention of the elders. Together, you can help ex-prisoners grow in Christ and avoid falling back into sin. Use the principles found in *Galatians 6:1-5.*

Follow the “One-Year Rule”: **No ex-prisoner should give his testimony or speak about his experiences outside of the support group until he has been out at least a year with no significant stumbles.** Putting someone “in the spotlight” may bring pressures greater than he is ready to handle -- or lead to the problem Paul mentions in *1 Timothy 3:6* about putting someone in a leadership position too early.

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