

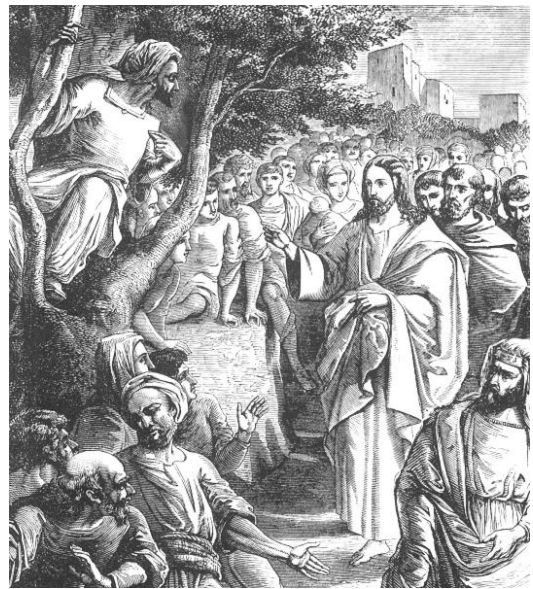
I was in prison and you came to visit me ... I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me. (Matthew 25:36, 40)

Follow Jesus' Footsteps

When Jesus was berated for eating with tax collectors and sinners, he answered that “it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

Back in the day, tax collectors had fallen into their own category of contempt — set apart, it seems from the rest of the sinners. They were considered corrupt, treacherous . . . criminal. Yet Jesus went to them, spent time with them, shared a friendly meal with them. He did not overlook what they had done or what they had become. But in the moral “sickness” of their sin, He offered them the healing of His forgiveness, His salvation, and even His friendship.

One of those hated tax collectors was Zacchaeus, a corrupt man who had grown rich by cheating others. When he climbed a tree to see what this Jesus was all about, the Lord invited Himself to dinner with Zacchaeus — again, to the irritation of the more “righteous” people in the crowd. But that loving invitation brought this corrupt tax collector to repentance and transformation — ready to make amends for his crimes. And then Jesus made an announcement to the crowd. “This man, too, is a son of Abraham” (Luke 19:9). This man that the others had considered an outcast was to be restored as a brother.



If Jesus were on earth today, would we find Him in the prisons, talking and dining with criminals and outcasts? Of course we would. He would be there “to seek and to save the lost” and to restore them to sonship, just as He did with Zacchaeus.

And because the Church is now His representative on earth, prison is where we should be as well — calling the sick to the healing touch of our Lord and Savior; still recognizing in them the dignity of God’s creation, no matter how far they have fallen; trusting that no one — NO ONE — is beyond Christ’s love and power to redeem.

The Scripture passages that follow give us insight into God’s heart for prison ministry. We hope these passages will encourage you to follow Jesus into the prisons and into the communities to minister to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families.

Follow Jesus' Example

God does not despise the broken; nor should we. Rather, we are to imitate the One who came to seek and to save the lost — as we once were — no matter what type of bonds enslave and cripple them.

Jesus identifies strongly with the weak, the helpless, and the outcast. He considers the way we treat *them* to be the way we treat *Him*. He wants us to identify with them as well, putting ourselves in their shoes and caring for them.

- “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my father; take your inheritance . . . For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ The King will reply, ‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.’” (Matthew 25:34-40)
- “Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” (Hebrews 13:1-3)



All Are Equal

Jesus admonishes us to show no partiality to others on the basis of their status in life. All are equally in need of Christ for forgiveness and salvation. All have equal potential to become mighty men and women of faith.

- “My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don’t show favoritism. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, ‘Here’s a good seat for you,’ but say to the poor man, ‘You stand there’ or ‘Sit on the floor by my feet,’ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” (James 2:1-5)

Share Freedom Behind Bars

God seeks to set prisoners free—not always from their physical prison, but certainly from their imprisonment by sin, ignorance, rebellion, and foolish choices. Jesus identified Himself as the source of this freedom. As this is an important part of God's work, it is an important part of the Church's work as well.

- “He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind, and LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.” (Psalm 146:7-9)
- “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.” (Isaiah 42:6-7)
- “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.” (Isaiah 61:1-3)
- “The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him [Jesus]. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.’ ” (Luke 4:17-19)
- “Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.’ ” (John 8:34-36)



Refinement and Transformation

Society may intend prison to be a place of punishment, but God can use it as a place of refinement and transformation. He does not give up on those in prison, but pursues them in love.

- “For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver. You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.” (Psalm 66:10-12)
- “A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families, he leads forth the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land.” (Psalm 68:5-7)
- “The LORD hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.” (Psalm 69:33)

Another Law at Work

We all know what it's like to be in bondage to — imprisoned by — our sin and foolishness apart from Christ. This is why many who work in prison ministry say, “I am really no different from those in prison.”

- “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.” (Romans 7:21-25)

Introduce Prisoners to God's Mercy

Most men and women in prison are there for a reason: They did the crime and are doing the time. Hitting rock bottom is what prods many offenders to take an honest look at their lives and cry out to God for mercy. And God is ready to give it.

- “Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labor; they stumbled, and there was no one to help. Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.” (Psalm 107:10-16)

Transformed lives point everyone's attention to God! This is the greatest motivation to get involved in prison ministry. No one else can take credit for the miraculous turnaround in criminals' lives.

- “Listen to my cry, for I am in desperate need; rescue me from those who pursue me, for they are too strong for me. Set me free from my prison, that I may praise your name. Then the righteous will gather about me because of your goodness to me.” (Psalm 142:6-8)



Remember No One is Beyond God's Reach

A person's past does not have to dictate his future. Even a former criminal, if he has learned from his mistakes and renounced his sins, can become a great leader in God's hands.

- “Better a poor but wise youth than an old but foolish king who no longer knows how to take warning. The youth may have come from prison to the kingship, or he may have been born in poverty within his kingdom. I saw that all who lived and walked under the sun followed the youth, the king's successor.” (Ecclesiastes 4:13-15)
- Also consider Moses, who was a murderer and a fugitive from justice when God called him to lead His people out of slavery. In the heat of passion, he had killed an Egyptian, hidden him in the desert sand, and fled the country because the head of the government was out to execute him (Exodus 2:11-15). Yet this is the man God called to lead His people to the Promised Land, to receive the Ten Commandments — to be a pivotal figure in salvation history.
- Or consider the apostle Paul, a former religious zealot who had burned in his hatred for Christians and conspired in putting them to death for their faith. Yet Jesus called Paul to Himself, directed him to write most of the New Testament, and turned him into the early Church's greatest missionary to the Gentiles.



Welcome Your Brothers and Sisters in Christ

Despite their past, offenders who come to Christ have a new identity and a new relationship to the Church! We are to receive them as *family*, our brothers and sisters in Christ.

- [Paul is writing to a slave-owner about one of his runaway slaves, Onesimus.] “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me . . . Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.” (Philemon 10-11, 15-16)
- After Saul, an enemy of the Church, had an encounter with Christ and was transformed, many Christians were hesitant to welcome him. “When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple. But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. So Saul stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem, speaking boldly in the name of the Lord.” (Acts 9:26-28)
- “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I don’t need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I don’t need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no

division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.”
(I Corinthians 12:21-25)

Carry Each Other's Burdens

As brothers and sisters, we are to assist Christians coming out of prison as they struggle over many hurdles to rejoin their families and their communities.

- “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)
- “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.” (Galatians 6:1-2)
- “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (Galatians 6:9-10)
- “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” (Romans 12:10-16)
- “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.” (Romans 15:5-7)

