7 Ways to Say No Behind Bars

by Jason Aten

Maintaining your boundaries can be a challenge when you spend most of your time in close quarters with people who don’t have your best interests in mind. One of the most important things you can do while inside is learn to do something that isn’t good for you. Whether you are being pressured to cover for someone else or asked to give up something to another prisoner, saying no can be difficult—or downright dangerous. Here are seven effective, healthy tools you can use to say no if necessary:

1) Know your boundaries in advance.
2) Avoid situations where you’ll be pressured into things you shouldn’t do.
3) Don’t lie or make up excuses.
4) Use “I feel” statements.
5) Say no, but offer an alternative or compromise.
6) After saying no, watch for guilt.
7) If you decide to say yes, do it on your terms.

HOW TO SAY NO:

When Mom Goes to Prison

by Grayson Pope

When she was 22, Cassie Cloesman fell head over heels in love with a man. To Cassie, their relationship seemed ideal. But he also sold drugs.

One day, she walked out of a gas station to find her car surrounded by police. “I was so embarrassed,” she remembers. She was arrested and charged with delivery and manufacturing of narcotics. She knew the pain her children were experiencing in their first things.”

A judge sentenced her to four years in a Michigan state prison.

Painful separation. Cassie remembers walking her boyfriend for three months and learned that she and her two children were living with him. They wanted Cassie to testify against her boyfriend. She didn’t want to see the man she loved locked up, so she said no.

Faith gradually became more important to Cassie, and she didn’t take her to church. Her arrest served as a wake-up call that revived her faith. When she was baptized at age 15, but that faith practically disappeared while in prison. Faith gradually became more important to Cassie, and she was determined to build stronger relationships with her families and God.

Separation from her kids was painful, but she found new hope in prison. Cassie knew the pain her mother assumed the role of caregiver once again, only this time for Cassie’s children. Fortunately, the facility where Cassie was incarcerated was only about 30 minutes away, so Cassie’s mother was able to bring her children to visit her every other week.

While in prison, Cassie wondered how she would make things better for herself and her children. Then she saw a posting for the Prison Fellowship Academy®, an intensive, biblically based program that takes incarcerated men and women through a life transformation process. She applied and was accepted into the program.

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Mom Goes to Prison

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Cassie says the Academy also helped prepare her for reentry. She especially enjoyed the class on budgeting and on preparing for job interviews to impress potential employers.

While in prison, she also signed her children up for Angel Tree®, the Prison Fellowship program that provides Christmas gifts to children from their incarcerated parents. This was the same program that provided her with Christmas gifts from her incarcerated father when she herself was a child. “They would say (the gifts) were from God and from my dad,” she remembers. “It was just, it was a wonderful experience.” To get to give her own kids that one experience through that same Angel Tree program was a powerful full circle. “It’s great to feel like you could actually do something for Christmas for them,” Cassie says.

Cassie was released after four years. She was sent home with a donated Bible and some basic supplies, plus some new clothes to begin her new life. “The first day of freedom, I was just so excited,” she remembers. “I was with my sister and my new brother-in-law and my dad, and I went and got my kids out of school early, and they ran and jumped in my arms, and it was just wonderful.”

Back with her children, Cassie began looking for jobs to support her family. She eventually found work in a call center, and then they moved from waiting tables. Between shifts, she loved spending quality time with her kids and staying active in her faith.

With the help of the financial literacy training Cassie received in the Academy, she was able to save enough money for a down payment on a house. She says about her home, “It’s just so beautiful. I even made a song about it, and me and my son sing it together.” And that togetherness is priceless.
by Zach Sewell

My friend Scott recently suffered a skiing accident. While he was on a slope, he decided to follow a side path that cut through the woods. He had never followed this path before and didn’t know that it led to a jump. He gained a lot of speed along the way, and at the end of the path, he found himself unexpectedly being launched several feet into the air. He landed on his left side, breaking four ribs and dislocating his shoulder. Scott was in excruciating pain and was having trouble breathing. The crash had knocked the wind out of him, and he wondered if he had punctured a lung. He lay in the snow for 10 minutes before he was finally able to breathe well enough to sit up. Then he climbed back onto his skis and slowly made his way to the bottom, his terrible pain making it difficult to stay upright.

Scott could have waited for help or even given up. But he knew it was important to reach the base quickly and seek medical attention. So, despite his pain, he got back on the right path and made his way to his destination. He persevered.

Are You Following the Right Path?

What four words first jump out at you in this word search? Are those the qualities and lead me along the path of everlasting life.” (Psalm 139:23–24)

In Matthew 7:13, toward the end of Jesus’ most famous sermon, He tells a story about two paths that represent the two ways of living. The first path Jesus describes is a wide one, which many people travel, and which ultimately leads to destruction. The second path is a narrow road that only a few people find, and it leads to life. The narrow path is just that: narrow. Following Jesus isn’t going to be the most popular choice. But it will lead you to the freedom of living in the promise of eternal life. You might face temptations to wander off the path. As sinners, we stumble. We fall down. We mess up. We relax. None of the people traveling the narrow road are perfect. The narrow path is full of people stumbling and picking themselves back up, through God’s grace, even if it means painfully inching their bruised and broken selves down the slope to their final destination. So how do we get on the narrow way? It starts with accepting Jesus—as your Savior, Friend, and God. He made the incredibly difficult decision to suffer and die for our wrong choices, opening the path for us to have a right relationship with God. Every choice to follow Jesus is made in response to what He first did because He loves us.

Tips to stay on track

There are practical strategies you can follow when trying to stay on the narrow path. Since perfection is not an option, I offer three suggestions:

First, when you fall, reflect on what caused you to slip, and try to avoid putting yourself in that situation again. And don’t dwell on your mistakes; pick yourself up and keep going.

Second, take responsibility for your sin. We often want to hide our sinful behavior from others, from God, and even from ourselves. Hiding our sins doesn’t help us move away from it. Sin grows in the dark, when we have no one to keep us accountable. Confess your sins, to God and to others, and ask for forgiveness.

Third, the healthy narrow path may mean walking away from something unhealthy. When I left a life of drug abuse and devoted myself to Jesus, I had to walk away from certain friendships. The narrow path will most likely cost you something. It may be relationships. It may be creature comforts. It may be popularity.

Jesus cared about love and compassion way more than popularity. In fact, there were times when Jesus’ actions and words caused people to dislike Him, spread rumors about Him, and even try to kill Him. But whether loved or hated, Jesus stayed on His course.

Staying the course

It can be tough to maintain the right course when life puts difficulties in our way. We face obstacles such as addictions, relationship problems, temptations, and fear. Adding to the challenge is knowing which path to take. Are we pursuing temporary happiness, which can lead to restlessness and disappointment? Or are we following the path of righteousness, which leads to true freedom?

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You can stay on the narrow path even in prison. You can also stay on it when you are released from prison. There will be setbacks. But just keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, until you reach the end.

Zach Sewell is a Kansas City-area minister and the author of Prisoners in the Bible, A Time to Preach, and the soon to be released Visceral Sin (fall 2019).
More Recipes From Readers

by Stacia Ray

In a recent edition of Inside Journal (Spring 2019), we ran an article called “A Prisoner’s Cookbook: Tasty Treats Behind Bars,” which included several recipes from a Minnesota prisoner named Angelina.

We asked you to send in any feedback or additional recipes, and the response was overwhelming. Your letters came pouring in, some filled with gratitude toward Angelina and some filled with even more recipes. We were very impressed by the creativity being used in prisons across the country. Instead of replying to everyone individually, we will simply say thank you to all of you who wrote to us. And for those of you who requested Angelina’s contact information or a copy of Angelina’s full cookbook, sharing her contact information is against regulations, and unfortunately there is no way to publish and mail out her full cookbook.

Mackerel Burger
as submitted by Melissa in Virginia

• 1 standard size package mackerel, drained
• 1 handful cheese puffs
• 1 small bag (single serve) favorite chips
• 1/4 packet ramen noodle seasoning

Mix all ingredients into small trash bag. Pat into burger patty shape. Microwave on high for three minutes. Serve over rice in a tortilla wrap, or on a bagel. Top with sauce made from mixing the following (to your liking): mayonnaise, mustard, hot sauce, sugar, and pickle juice.

Note from Melissa: “Not saying you won’t be run out of the common area for cooking fish, but it’s a chance we all take.”

Garlic Ranch Chicken Alfredo
as submitted by Lorry in Arizona

• 4.5 oz. chicken breast
• 1 (3.7-oz.) packet Thai rice noodles
• 3 oz. (two 1.5-oz. packets) ranch dressing

Add 1 cup water to noodles and veggie mix. Place Thai rice noodles and veggie mix in bowl with lid (use only veggie packet, not the seasoning packet). Heat 1 large cup (about 20 oz.) water until hot. Add hot water to dry rice noodles and veggie mix. Cover with lid. Set aside to soak (10 minutes). In small bowl, mix together ranch, mayo, garlic, pepper, dry powder milk. After noodles have soaked for 10 minutes, drain water, then add sauce (and peas) and mix well. Gently and carefully fold in chicken breast. Heat in microwave until warm. Serve with crackers.

Hot Wings
as submitted by Elizabeth in Texas

• Pork skins (or pork rind snacks)*
• Barbeque sauce*
• Ranch dressing*

Place pork skins/rinds in a bowl with a lid. Heat 1/4 packet ramen noodle seasoning in a bowl. Add equal parts barbeque sauce and ranch dressing until coated. Place lid on bowl and shake bowl until all mixed together. Serve and eat! *The amount you use will depend on how many servings you want to make.

Trail Mix Supreme
as submitted by Junior in Florida

• 3 oz. (two 1.5-oz. packets) apple cinnamon oatmeal
• 2 oz. (1 single-serve packet) trail mix
• 6 oz. (three 2-oz. squeeze packets) peanut butter

Mix all ingredients together and enjoy!

But this experience has shown us how much you enjoy the idea of cooking and baking with commissary items. So in this edition, we decided to share more recipes from readers. We only had room for a few, as there were just too many to print. If you submitted a recipe that isn’t shown here, you might still see it in a future edition of Inside Journal. And if you have an amazing dish you’d like us to share, please mail us at: Inside Journal, ATTN: Recipes, P.O. Box 1790, Ashburn, VA 20146-1790.

NOTE: Some of these ingredients may not be available or allowed in all facilities, and restrictions on cooking vary. Be sure to comply with your facility’s rules and regulations.

Mackerel Burger

Deluxe Peanut Butter French Toast**
as submitted by Lynn in North Carolina

• 2 slices buttered toast or firm French toast
• 1—2 tbsp. peanut butter
• 2 full-size Reese’s (or similar) peanut butter cups
• Approx. 2 oz. honey or maple syrup

Spread peanut butter on both pieces of toast to your liking. Place peanut butter cups inside the two pieces like a sandwich. Then pour honey or maple syrup onto outer piece of toast. Let sit for an hour to soak in, then eat. **This recipe was submitted as an unnamed treat; the editors thought “Sugar Rush” was a little too obvious a name.

LA Rams Inspire Prisoners’ Children

In California this past June, the Los Angeles Rams hosted an Angel Tree Sports Clinic™ for children with incarcerated parent. Through lessons, drills, and fun competition, kids were treated like champions and learned about God’s love.

More than 100 boys and girls from across California attended the clinic at the Rams’ practice facility. Kids were joined by pro players Clay Matthews, Kendall Blanton, and other Rams players. News crews from the Los Angeles Times and the NFL Network covered the event. The children had an experience of a lifetime. LA Rams offensive lineman Matt Kaskey talked about the power of sports in his own life. “It’s important to teach these kids... to come out here and help them and show them how to do things right; how to have a good time, but also how to live a good life,” said Matt.

Coach John Fassel added, “At this clinic, the kids come to life. Their eyes get big. They feel like somebody cares about them.”

Angel Tree, a program of Prison Fellowship, provides pathways to restore and strengthen relationships between children of prisoners and their families. All year, Angel Tree provides encouragement and support to families affected by incarceration through sports clinics, camps, and mentoring.

Grammar-Winning Rapper Visits Prison

This spring, rapper Lecrae and members of the 116 Clique made an unpublicized tour stop with Prison Fellowship at the Carol S. Vance Unit in Texas. Lecrae says he feels at home making a visit behind bars. He grew up visiting his father and uncles behind bars and later volunteered in juvenile halfway houses. These experiences, and his growing Christian faith, gave him a passion for prison ministry. Lecrae and his group ate with the incarcerated men in the chow hall and swapped truck stories. He’s so impressed by the creativity being used in prisons across the country. Instead of replying to everyone individually, we will simply say thank you to all of you who wrote to us. And for those of you who requested Angelina’s contact information or a copy of Angelina’s full cookbook, sharing her contact information is against regulations, and unfortunately there is no way to publish and mail out her full cookbook.

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Insider Journal Fall 2019

Deluxe Peanut Butter French Toast

Rapper Lecrae visits with prisoners.

PAGE 3 WORD SEARCH: ANSWER KEY

Word Search Answer Key:


By day’s end, several Prison Fellowship Academy participants performed an original rap, followed by a surprise freestyle session by Lecrae’s squad. Words of hope filled the room. The place erupted in cheers.

Lecrae said, “We’re visiting like a little bookmark saying, ‘Hey, your story’s not over.’”

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