

Florida: The gospel at work behind bars

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As I stand in the entryway to the chapel, a man explains to me his wife was due to have a baby last week, but he hasn't heard from her lately, and the last report he had was not good. With a broken heart, I think to myself, "What a great opportunity to begin showing this man how to have hope and begin mending a relationship."

But there's just one problem. He's one of 180 inmates streaming into the prison chapel at Century Correctional Institute. I'm the only chaplain on the compound today, and I have volunteers waiting to begin the service.

A Church of Christ volunteer is here to conduct a separate service, and I need to unlock one of the classrooms. There aren't enough chairs anywhere. The praise band needs me to unlock the closet with the guitars and drumsticks. Many of these guys are just here to soak up some air conditioning, and a man's life is falling apart in front of me!

Such is the life of a correctional chaplain. As a chaplain's summer intern, I get to see every part of it.

That little story was all true, but most of the week is not nearly as lively. Every Thursday afternoon, I teach a class of about 25 good men who love the Lord. I teach a Spanish-speaking group on Tuesdays and lead their praise band. I go to confinement areas to distribute much-coveted reading material and pray for men at their lowest point. I counsel a few who seek me out to help with private spiritual matters, as well.

Correctional chaplaincy has proved very rewarding for several reasons. First, I get to make disciples among an otherwise unreached people group.

The fact that I choose to come here several days a week to reach these men is very respected even by well-known gang members. Second, I get to see the gospel at work in exactly the kind of place it belongs—the darkness of a prison.

New faces attract attention in any isolated people group, especially a prison. As a former correctional officer, I know confidence and professionalism gains respect. As a chaplain, the principle is the same, even though it is a significantly different dynamic. When I walk into a room full of inmates, all eyes are on me. They see I am unafraid. When I am laughing and joking with the inmates on the walkway I notice everyone watching. They always ask why. I always tell them, “If Jesus left heaven to come for me, I can leave the ‘free-world’ to come to you.”

“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I have received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example for those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15b-16).

That’s why I always tell the men that the gospel was made for people like us. Last Thursday, I taught on a familiar passage, The Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:1-20. In that parable, different hearts respond to the same word in different ways.

These men behind bars began to share story after story of how the power of the gospel brought them hope, peace and even joy in every circumstance. Some of these men have been locked up for 40 years; others for just a few. Some left gang life and drug dealing. Others left families and careers behind. All faced crippling trials—legal and spiritual. That is the power of Christ unto salvation. Reconciled to God, free from sin and sent to do his work, these men inspire me to keep going.

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