

BLESSINGS TO THOSE INVOLVED IN JAIL & PRISON MINISTRIES

By Buck Griffith

Fear has amazing power. It holds us hostage. It prevents us from “trying” to do things (especially if never tried before). Individual Christians and churches are overcoming the fear of jail and prison ministry involvement in growing number. Those involved report such wonderful blessings that others want to try it. First, consider a few facts. As recently as 1978 there were 24 congregations and 110 individual Christians involved in this work. By 1986, the numbers grew to 280 churches and 375 individuals. By 2000, it reached 603 congregations and 1,257 individuals. The most recent tally shows 1,000+ churches and 2,300+ individuals. Reports reflect 10,000 baptisms each year in the USA as a direct result of such efforts. It is not an exaggeration to say that jail/prison ministries represent the fastest growing and fruitful programs. What other blessings lie in store?

Satisfaction

John writes: “This is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands” (Second John 6). The Lord issued our *marching orders* in Mark 16:15. Our “territory” is worldwide. As long as jails and prisons exist, these souls need the gospel. Satan hides souls from the light. God’s only legs to reach them are our own. We are light in a dark world. When and if we visit the least in prison, we are ministering to Jesus (Matthew 25:44-45). Many church members feel “fair” about their response to the hungry, thirsty, naked, sick and strangers. After all, they bring items to the church’s clothing room and food pantry. They may not actually “touch” those in need but feel better after giving. But, what about the verse: “I was in *prison* and you visited me not”? I know a few Christians who have actually read these verses and decided to *obey*.

Church on a Hill

The church involved in this outreach stands out – like a city on a hill (Matthew 5:14-16). No trumpet is needed. Obedience shouts loudly. No ads need to be placed. You can’t pay for this kind of advertising. People all over town know about the church that cares for troubled souls. Most people, places and even their home churches gave up on them years ago. You really believe in *the God of Second Chances!* You become known as The Place to go if you are less than perfect (or if someone in your family has made a bad mistake). *Self-righteous* folks and organizations in other places will refer suffering souls to your place. “Your” place ought to be the kind of place that Jesus would “own” if making a modern-day *house call*.

Member Involvement

Although there is one “body,” it consists of *many* members (First Corinthians 12:12). *Some* members are drawn to this ministry who *never* found their niche in any other aspect of the Lord’s work. There are *many* ways to get involved. Personally “going behind bars” is *one* way. I’ll never forget the elder’s wife who became a Bible correspondence grader. She was overwhelmed to have students asking for help in obeying the gospel. She said, “*For the first time in my life, I feel like I have played a major role in leading a soul to Christ!*” One of our men (Jerry) helps put our portable baptistries together. They are shipped all over the world. I know of 1,000 prisoners baptized each year in *one* baptistry. Still, nothing was more rewarding to Jerry than hearing of the use of one of “his” baptistries to immerse a man at his home recently. The man is dying of cancer.

Forgiveness Practiced

A prison ministry gives the church opportunities to “practice” *forgiveness*. The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:12) urges us to forgive *as we forgive others*. In fact, we can’t be forgiven without it! Most Christians struggle with this. We enjoy talking about others’ faults. One man sinned publicly and responded the next Sunday, asking for forgiveness. A lady after services was overheard saying with a hint of regret: “Well, I guess this means we *have to* stop talking about it?” Yep! After a few weeks being involved in this ministry, a member said: “It’s easy now to forgive Sister Jones when she repents of *gossiping*. After all, last week we forgave two murderers and a rapist!” We frequently announce the baptisms of men and women whose crimes are well known.

Generosity

God loves *cheerful* givers (Second Corinthians 9:7). Prison ministries inspire generosity. “I have been looking for a place that helps others without anticipating a *return* on the investment” is a comment repeatedly heard. People are tired of giving to churches that mostly use funds to serve themselves. Some congregations have three, or more ministers *on staff* but seldom have *one* whose primary target is: jails, prisons or some other

dungeon. Most baptisms in local churches are our own children. Please, do not get the wrong idea. I am glad our churches have multiple ministers. I rejoice to see new facilities constructed – Christian schools, gyms, and *more!* What bothers me is *tithing our spice*. All that is OK but *do not leave the other undone!* For the most part, prisoners are lost and have never heard of us. With 7,500,000 touched in some way by the *criminal justice system* – this represents a huge mission field. It is hard to find a person today without a family member involved – past, present, or future. Paul spoke of donors who “begged” him to take their gifts to relieve the suffering saints in Jerusalem. I am glad to say that I’ve had folks “beg” me to take their money to win souls in prisons. Afterward, they cannot stop “thanking” me enough for giving them the opportunity to help. Wow!

Attractiveness

The early church constantly grew (Acts 6:7). Visitors are attracted to churches involved in prison ministry. I call it a pleasing scent, flavor, or aroma. They may not become personally involved in the ministry, but it is important for them to belong to an evangelistic church. They want to contribute to a congregation and to a fiscal budget that includes jail/prison ministries. They have “heard” about this *city on a hill* before moving here. They now look for us upon arrival. Also, prison ministry attracts family members of offenders. Most of them will not wear expensive clothing or drive late-model vehicles. All nationalities are represented. This may be startling to some long-time members. In the past, we all looked alike – the same nationality and wearing similar clothes with our late model cars. Sadly, that old church was dwindling, aging, and dying. We drew the lines so tightly – we strangled ourselves!

Crime Prevention

Every congregation is engaged in crime prevention. It begins before a child is born and continues in the Church Nursery. It is followed by efforts of parents/teachers as children move from pre-school through high school. Many invest in fulltime youth ministers, Christian schools and ultimately – universities (with campus ministries if not a Christian university). If a youth gets into trouble with the law along the way, we refuse to give up on him/her. We go to the juvenile detention facility and work with probation departments and others. However, if the youth turns 18 and gets in trouble as an adult, we refuse to give up. We go to the County Jail. 90% in the county jail will not go to prison but are soon back in our community. Some will make restitution or go into alcohol-drug treatment centers. We walk with them through these trying days. Sadly, some fail to awaken spiritually and will go from the County Jail to a state or federal prison. But we refuse to give up on them and minister to them there. At some point they will come out of these institutions. The *criminal justice system* does what it is designed to do (constitutionally hold persons in custody for whatever period of time society has prescribed). But at some point, they will be released – for better or for *worse!* Churches involved in this ministry better positioned to make a positive difference. It depends on how we ministered to them while locked up and how we respond when they are released. We can do what the *system* is not designed to do. The “church” is God’s plan for true and lasting reconciliation.

Is There Danger?

Yes. But there is greater danger in NOT doing God’s Will! Yes, you will be fooled by some, taken advantage of by others and embarrassed by those who relapse and return to old behaviors (Second Peter 2:20-22). However, this also happens with church members who have never received a speeding ticket! It is impossible for us to so insulate ourselves as to never experience the torment of this war between good and evil. We must declare our allegiance to what is good and right. *Jail/prison ministry is good, and it is the right thing to do.*

Your Choice

The choice is now up to you. You are invited to get involved in this exciting mission field. You are invited to begin making a positive difference. You are invited to receive a multitude of blessings! If you are interested in getting involved – as a congregation or *as an individual* – contact us. We will be glad to tell you what we did (including avoidable mistakes). This will help maximize even greater blessings in store for you.

Family Upreach, Inc.
(NewLife Behavior Ministries)
P. O. Box 270720, Corpus Christi, Texas 78427
(361) 855-3372 Fax (361) 855-7469
Website: www.nlbm.org
Email: nlbcasa@yahoo.com