

Prison and Preaching: The View from Death Row

William Neal Moore

*Georgia Diagnostic and Classification Center, G-House, P.O. Box 3877,
Jackson, GA 30233*

Ed.: William Neal Moore has been on death row in Georgia for fifteen years. He has one remaining appeal to the United States Supreme Court.

Greetings, Pastor. It has come to my attention that you are going to preach to your congregation about prison ministry.

One of the worst things about prison is being locked away from your family for years. Your children grow into young adults, going through their teenage years, experiencing all the usual problems, but you are not there to help them through. This absence during difficult times is hard both on the child and on the adult in prison.

Relationships are strained to the limits. Children cannot understand why their parent cannot come home. They begin to believe that their mom or dad doesn't love them, and this causes a great void in their lives.

The spouse is thrust into a dual role—trying to be both mother and father for the children, often without any support from the church and the community. Rather than being embraced, shown love, and helped, these families are ostracized in the communities and by the churches in general.

Being in prison also creates problems when freedom is regained. In prison all of your decisions are made for you. You are stripped of your self-esteem and self-worth. When you are freed, you are dumped out into society with no preparation and little hope of being able to make it in life.

The years in prison represent only part of the punishment by the state. Once you are freed, society continues to punish the ex-convict. You are not hired for jobs; the churches have no programs to assist in the readjustment to society; and you are forced onto state welfare programs when you would rather work, support your own family, and be a part of society again.

Many people wonder why those on the outside should care for prisoners. First, because of Christ we are to share the same love that God has shared with us and be the salt and light in this dark world. Second, most prisoners will be let out into society. One way to stop a person's desire to steal and hurt others is to bring them face to face with the Lord Jesus Christ, who can change the lives of people and give them the desire and heart to do what is right. Do we really believe in the power of God to change a person's life?

The message of the gospel is love that gives birth to forgiveness, and the churches need to share this spirit with the families of prisoners. We are called to help in time of need, and a prison sentence is a time of need both for the prisoner and for the family which is left without one of its members. It is a crucial time when the truth of the gospel needs to be extended to these

families so that the children can be taught in the ways of the Lord Jesus Christ and not in the ways that might lead them to prison as well.

On Sunday morning I hear on the television from the many preachers how you should accept the Lord Jesus Christ into your life. God loves us and we all are one family in Christ. There must be two different families, for none of these preachers has prison outreach ministries. It would seem to me that here in prison is the perfect opportunity to bring the gospel to a captive group of men and women that need the gospel. But there aren't any voices from the churches coming into the prisons. Strange—since most of the Apostle Paul's Epistles were written from prison.

If we are sisters and brothers in Christ then why shouldn't those on the outside be concerned with our welfare and life? There are so many things to do to show your concern: books could be sent in; funds could be mailed; members of churches could start a visitation program and help prisoners learn more of Christ. In this way the gospel becomes real when caring people share the love of God.

I am a murderer, and I didn't know God or care about anyone besides myself. However, a preacher from Rome, Georgia came to me and told me about the gospel. Even though I am a murderer, Jesus died for me, too, so that I can have life and forgiveness of the sins that I have committed. I can be placed in the family of Christ. Rather than hurting people, now I can share the love of Christ that I have experienced and which changed my life. If I could be born again, then anybody else can.

The important factor is that prisoners need the churches on the outside to help us. There are just three prison chaplains here for 1,800 men. How can they possibly get to everyone? There isn't any way. We need the voice of the free body of Christ to come into the prisons.

Another thing congregations can do is to find the victims of crimes and try to create a program that will bring together both the victims and the defendants, so that there can be discussion, explanation, healing, and some forgiveness as well as repentance. Also a concrete program could be set up in which prisoners could work to support and repay those who have lost property. The church can be the instrument in creating such a program. That is a biblical principle of restoring those things that have been stolen.

Prison life is very hard and frustrating, but with the Lord Jesus Christ, I was able to make it through the death of my mother, brother, grandmother, uncle, and aunt. I've been able to go on in the face of the fact that my ex-wife is a drug addict and now my son has joined the ranks of teenage crack users.

I face the struggle against the state that has spent millions of dollars in their efforts to kill me. There isn't a day that passes when the forces of death are not before me. I know combat soldiers face battle in worse situations for two or three years; but it's nearly sixteen years now that I have struggled in hope that the same God in whom you believe will move in my behalf and spare me.

Then at times I wonder, what for? The outside world is a mess; the youth are going wild! But the Lord continues to remind me that I lived that sort of life on the other side of righteousness. With God's power and guidance plus my

experience of prison, I can make a real difference in the lives of people who are in trouble. I know what a prison ministry should be and how to reach the prisoners and the people on the streets.

As for my own life here on Death Row, I know that the Lord Jesus has saved me for the purpose to teach others like myself. I can help bring prisoners to the truth that there is a Savior, and no matter how low a person has sunk, the grace of God can and will reach down to lift them up. I try to teach all of us to be constructive citizens of the human race and to show forth the glory of God in taking our lives and creating new ones that benefit the kingdom of God and all people.

Hope keeps me alive, and I must stay centered on the Word of the Lord and not on the circumstances around me, the standing of my case, the voice of the state, or even my own attorneys. I must listen to the Lord and realize the fact that the power is with God and not with humans to decide my fate as to my staying here on this earth doing the work the Lord has set before me.

The churches need to know that we are people, too. We have the same faith in the same Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To help prisoners is to minister to part of the body of Christ.