

## Brave Church/Hard Topics, 3/29/2023: THE AMERICAN PRISON SYSTEM, Week 2 of 3: Christianity & the Prison System

This is the chat log of the discussion. Names and identifiable information have been removed for privacy. References to slides for this session can be found in the ***Brave Church – Prison System 2 3-29-23.pdf*** document linked [Brave Church-Hard Topics web page](#).

Additional information added after the discussion are identified with “NOTE:”

### Discussion Questions 1 (slide 3)/Whiteboard:

**What elements guide your thinking on criminal justice & the prison system?**

- What beliefs?
- What scriptures?
- What values?

See: **Beliefs, Scriptures, Values Page.pdf** for responses

Reference added during the discussions: <https://www.whsv.com/2023/03/28/youngkin-administration-changes-policies-regarding-restoring-rights-convicted-felons/>

### Discussion Questions 2 (slide 8):

**What stood out to you?**

**What religious beliefs & values are reflected in our current system?**

**About God? Humanity? Justice? Mercy?**

What stood out: the “penitent” concept behind the early prisons. Some of that still lingers, but may be not as much (buried under the surface).

In the parole process you need to say that you were wrong. So they are still looking for a penitent before granting parole.

How influential Christian beliefs were at various points, and how they’ve evolved over time, influencing different directions.

Quaker approach, mediation, working in garden – Lorton Prison had dairy farm where prisoners worked (perhaps in the 70s and 80s). Not sure how much of that was done today in other prisons.

What other values are reflected in current system?

The value of human rights – someone else can’t violate your rights without repercussions.

Progress in the area of a better legal system and lawyers to help ensure a fair trial.

Rights are being violated in the prisons and there seems to be no good way to manage that problem.

Do prisoners have the same rights that others do? Free speech? Assembly?

They don’t have the right to not be enslaved (13<sup>th</sup> amendment allows that). Not sure about some of the others.

1987 Turner vs Safley, US Supreme Court made clear that prison walls do not form a barrier separating inmates from the protections of the Constitution. Individuals retain certain fundamental rights, even when incarcerated.

Never occurred that prison system was a step forward from physically punishing/killing. The value of hope and redemption and the opportunity to change and make a difference in people's lives.

Hard to look at system we're a part of and ask what it is really saying/what values it is reflecting.

8<sup>th</sup> amendment – doesn't allow cruel/unusual punishment

On legal system – in reality, don't always get quality representation. For example, Bryan Stevenson's book Just Mercy. Actually took some cases to supreme court for violating cruel/unusual punishment (in cases of juveniles).

Training on volunteering in prison – in training, tours – told to beware, look out, don't believe anything they tell you. A general ethos of a different level of humanity. System seems to cultivate suspicion.

Prisons remaining "extremely religious spaces" – I get the sense that at least some folks tend to be suspicious of religious conversions.

Should we be suspicious of the sudden conversion to Christianity?

Very good point! Would we think differently about a conversation if person were not a prisoner?

I think it is wrong for us to make the assumption that this sudden conversion is not real. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt.

Chuck Colson was imprisoned and later started a prison ministry.

A different class of people – by definition, they are because of the system they've set up: don't have same rights, privileges. Set up as a different society. Exist in a different place.

Is that inherent in them or is it the system?

It's the system - they've all been put there together.

Live in a different world – at some point, we all made a decision to trust God, nobody questions that. It is wrong for us to make that assumption that theirs is any less so.

This is a good point. it seems that we're operating under the assumption that all people who are in prison are guilty. This is not always the case.

The prison population is very diverse – a bunch of different people there for different reasons. Have been to high security prisons many times and have seen religious experiences where people were often very devout and dedicated. But you get both. Some have these manipulative skills.

Recognizing that we're each and every one created in the image of God means (at least to me) that we need to look at each person as an individual in order to see the image of God in them.

### **Discussion Questions 3 (Slide 12):**

**What would a different way look like...**

- **To base our justice system in mercy, grace, second chances? (can you imagine a different system?)**

- **Are you concerned about a limit at which reforms become “too lenient”?**
- **How can we challenge our fears of “criminals” with proximity?**
- **What do victims or those harmed by crime need from the system?**

In all of our discussions on this, how the justice system and how society (we) respond depends on who the victim is, who the perpetrator is – some victims are deemed more trustworthy than others; some perpetrators are more ‘worthy’ than others. Depends on socio-economic background on victim and perpetrator – all of that skews how they are viewed in the justice system. Disproportionate responses.

Some crimes are underpunished, for example, corporate and white-collar crimes. They don't seem to count and they often get no jail time. Steal a loaf of bread, and it's a whole different outcome.

That is so true.

Of the people we put in jail for whatever reason, almost all of them will be released. Unless they get skills, something replaces their skill set, they won't be prepared for life outside. Need to do more than punishment – skill development is important.

Societal shortcomings – not being taught how to deal with anger; guns are seen as something that makes them ‘big’. There also have been studies showing that the age of those potentially committing crimes has an effect. We set our young people up on a road to the prison system.

School to prison pipeline.

he systemic issues are always a struggle, but as a Christian, how do I interact with people in prison? I don't but would like to. Jesus said, ‘feed my sheep.’ This is not a conditional act to feed those sheep. It's not my job to figure out if they should be there, but my response is to keep in mind that they are children of God.

It takes some intentionality to get into proximity to those so distant from us.

What would a just legal system look like? You will need a legitimate blindfold like lady Liberty. If you really want to make it just, we'd need to have a ‘legit’ blindfold (as we see w/ Lady Justice). Same level field no matter background. How do you do that? Get the best lawyer possible.

Is it taking your privilege and using it to help someone else.

Not as much evening things out to the lowest bar, but maybe raising the standard for all.

Fair justice for each one. Keeping the best interests of the individual in mind.

Another way of looking at things: People are not born criminals. It becomes important for us to work to understand how people start going down that road. Not all of them are things they can be held accountable for or responsible for.

If we want to really do something about crime in our society, we need to think about how people get there in the first place.

You have to have the means to afford an attorney to get out of trouble. That's not available for all people.

Providing everyone with a good quality public defender would require tax dollars. A lot of people don't want to do that. They want to punish the poor for being poor. It costs more to put someone in jail than to invest in school programs that could prevent them. We as a society need to think about what we want to pay for.

A book related to this: Hobbs, Jeff. The Short and Tragic Life of Robert Peace: a brilliant young man who left Newark for the Ivy League.

We talked last week – how many people their first entry into the justice system was under 18-19. That connects to what some have said here. Other ideas – once something has happened, how can we make sure people have equal footing under justice. But the whole system is set up trying to get off. Is this (lack of accountability) what we want? The idea for restorative justice is to hold people accountable without sending them into a black hole of the prison system.

We will talk more about this next week.

Katie will send out a 43-min video (can watch on 1.5 speed) on restorative justice – Nelson will email this tomorrow.