

## Law & Order, Yes, but What About Faith, Hope & Love?

During my 10 years as a missionary in Mexico, my main ministry was teaching Christian leaders and pastors. I did all that as a missionary but there was one ministry I did as a member of my church in Mexico: teaching and preaching at the CERESO prison, *Center of Social Readaptation*. But don't let the name fool you; the most hardcore criminals are incarcerated there. I first got involved with this ministry in 2005 through the Jerusalem Baptist Church (of Chihuahua), which my family and I attended for 8 years. A team of us would go there every Friday night and teach the inmates for an hour and fellowship thereafter. Driving there and going through several security checkpoints inside the prison would make each trip about 4 hours long. After two years, a church was organized inside the prison since many became believers, which meant that we would now go there every Sunday. But I slowly stopped going because, among other reasons, I often preached at other churches on Sundays. In 2008 I returned there to preach because of a pulpit exchange drawing among the Baptist pastors (who always included me). After preaching in front of more than 100 inmates, a prisoner named "Señor Mata" wanted to talk to me. (By the way, his name means, "Kill," which is fitting because he was convicted of murder.) After telling me how blessed he was by my sermon, Mr. Mata wanted to know why I hadn't come there for a long time. I quickly gave him the customary answer, "I've been very busy," to which he responded, "I guess we are not important as they are." Sounding defensive, I reassured him that that wasn't so, after which he calmly asked, "Then please come here at least once a month to preach because we need to hear from you." Inasmuch as I felt cornered, I also felt grateful for being wanted, which is how I ended up preaching there once a month until 2010, when visitation was no longer allowed due to the escalating violence inside the prison.

Those of us engaged in public ministry should not look for accolades from people, but it's nice to hear one on occasion. So why are prisoners so appreciative of people visiting them with the Christian love? Once I received a letter from an inmate (Jay) at Fred C. Nelles Youth Correctional Facility in Whittier, California, a prison for young hardcore criminals. In the 1990s my church regularly visited this prison, and during one visit, I explained to Jay the difficulty in encouraging my congregation to participate in this ministry. Most of our members did not know too much about the prison life, let alone how to minister to the inmates. Thus, he wrote this letter in response to my request that he educate us on how to better serve them. The following is a condensed version of his letter:

"Hello, my brothers and sisters, my name is Jay. I'm writing to you to let you know we in the Fred C. Nelles Ministry would like to meet you so that we can exchange prayers and fellowship in the Lord. The brothers that you meet are all living soldiers of God who are trying to spread the love of God in this DARK AND LONELY institution. I was very encouraged and inspired the last time you guys came: a nice, delicious dinner, group prayer, the drama group, and the important word from your pastor. You guys make me smile when you are here. I may be down

that Sunday and your church just picks me up along with the strength of the Lord. While you are here there is no need to worry about your safety because . . . you will be around brothers from the ages of 14-18 who has a serious love for God and by no means will have any type of negativity towards you. We are a family in Christ and our goal while you are here is to encourage one another. We are all in Christ and we love you in the Lord. We'd love to hear from you. Your Brother in Christ, -Jay S.

So as you plan for the New Year, pray about being involved in a ministry such as visiting the prisoners, sick, needy and lonely people. Remember the words of Jesus in Matthew 25:36: "I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." It is not only for them; it can do a lot of good for us as well! Look around at work or school because there is always someone who is in a different kind of imprisonment. You can reach him or her.

### **Further Reflection**

1. Reading the prison epistles of the Apostle Paul, who was imprisoned twice in Rome, gives us an opportunity to sense what went on inside Paul's mind during his incarceration. Read 2 Tim. 4:9-11,
2. Read Matthew 25:31-46, 1 John 3:16-20 & James 2:14-17, and then respond to this question:  
How important is reaching out to the poor according to God's word?

### **Bible Reading**

Friday	Proverbs 12 & Judges 12
Saturday	Proverbs 13 & Judges 13
Sunday	Proverbs 14 & Judges 14