



**Christian Reflection**  
A Series in Faith and Ethics

**Christian Reflection**  
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## Study Guides for

# Prison

These guides integrate Bible study, prayer, and worship to explore the problems we face in the modern prison system, offer theological critiques, and invite us to embrace positive Christian responses. Use them individually or in a series. You may reproduce them for personal or group use.

- Divine Justice as Restorative Justice** 2  
While it contains retributive components, God's justice as described in Scripture is fundamentally a restoring and renewing justice. Knowing this, the Church is obliged to practice restorative justice in its own ranks and to summons society to move in the same direction.
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Has the gospel's integrity been sacrificed to sanction the violence that accompanies legal systems? The weight of both New Testament ethical teaching and Church tradition declare there is never a need for Christians to inflict such violent retributive punishment on anyone.
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### Focus Article:

📖 Divine Justice as Restorative Justice  
(Prison, pp. 11-19)

### What do you think?

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# Divine Justice as Restorative Justice

While it contains retributive components, God's justice is fundamentally a restoring and renewing justice. Knowing this, the Church is obliged to practice restorative justice in its own ranks and to summons society to move in the same direction.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 32:16-18

Responsive Reading: Psalm 89:1, 14-16

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;  
**with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.**

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;  
**steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.**

Happy are the people who know the festal shout,  
who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;  
**they exult in your name all day long,  
and extol your righteousness.**

### Reflection

The Bible says a lot about justice – both *social* justice that shares resources fairly and *criminal* justice that penalizes wrongdoing. Chris Marshall notes how closely these two are related: “If we took more seriously the biblical imperative to care for the poor and dispossessed, to avoid the unjust accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of the few, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed by debt or exploitation, we would have less cause to employ criminal sanctions against those on the margins of the community who feel they have no stake in society.”

With regard to criminal justice, the theme of retribution (or “paying back”) arises in Scripture at two points: only the *guilty* deserve punishment and their penalty should be *proportionate* to their wrongful deeds. Thus, retribution stands opposed to arbitrary and vengeful retaliation. Yet, “biblical teaching on justice is [not] wholly or solely controlled by some impersonal metaphysical principle of measure for measure. Instead it has a distinctively personal and relational character,” Marshall writes. “Criminal offending was considered wrong, first, because it breaches the relational commitments that hold society together and, second, because the wrongful deeds themselves unleash a disordering power in the community that threatens to trigger a chain-reaction of ruin and disaster unless it is arrested.”

He surveys four levels of the biblical material that reveal the fundamental relational and restorative character of God's justice.

- ▶ At the *linguistic level*, “justice” and “righteousness” overlap in meaning. They refer to a relation with God and others, not a trait one has on one's own. Wrongdoing is punished “to put right what has gone wrong, to protect the community, and to restore the integrity of its life and its relationship with God. Justice is satisfied by the restoration of peace to relationships, not by the pain of punishment per se” (cf. Isaiah 32:16-18).
- ▶ The *macro level* is “one large story of God's restorative justice at work.” God creates a world where we can live in right relation-



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ship with God, one another, and the wider creation, but we commit the crime of violating these relationships. "God, the righteous judge, sets in motion the long historical process of recovery" through Noah, Abraham, the nation of Israel, and, ultimately, Jesus Christ and the Church, that "liberates humanity from its subjection to the dominion of sin and death and renews human nature from the inside out."

- ▶ On the *legislative level*, offenders are obligated to repair relationships and restore community. They must recognize their guilt and confess; repent (change direction) by making amends; provide restitution and more to their victims; and seek reconciliation with the injured parties and God.
- ▶ New Testament writers focus on the *ecclesial level*, guiding churches to treat offending members in ways that reflect God's restorative justice in Christ (e.g., Galatians 6:1 and 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, 10-11). Yet the principles are meant to apply to society too, Marshall concludes. "If Paul were to come among us today, singing of God's amazing grace on Sundays while on Mondays supporting, or being indifferent to, the retributive degradation of the present penal system, he would say what he said to the Ephesians who were being seduced by the standards of wider society: 'That is not the way you learned Christ! For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus' (4:20-21). The truth of God's justice is in Jesus, and that justice is a liberating and restoring justice. The Church fails in its vocation if it fails to proclaim, to embody, and to advocate the principles of restorative justice in every sphere of life."

### Study Questions

1. The common idea that "the Bible articulates and endorses an essentially *retributive* conception of corrective justice" is only partly right, Chris Marshall says. What retributive elements does he find in the biblical material?
2. Why, according to Marshall, should we avoid "seizing on selected biblical texts or practices to do with justice" using them as proof texts for our views of justice?
3. How does each "level" in Marshall's survey of the biblical material point in a holistic way toward restorative justice? What further questions do you have about each level?

### Departing Hymn: "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven" (verses 1 and 5)

Praise, my soul, the King of heaven,  
to his feet your tribute bring;  
ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,  
evermore his praises sing.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise the everlasting King.

Angels, help us to adore him,  
you behold him face to face;  
sun and moon, bow down before him,  
dwellers all in time and space.  
Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise with us the God of grace.

Henry Francis Lyte (1834)  
Tune: LAUDA ANIMA



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### Focus Article:

📖 The Measure with which We Measure  
(*Prison*, pp. 20-28)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Christian Critiques of the Penal System  
(*Prison*, pp. 84-88)

### What do you think?

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# The Measure with which We Measure

Has the gospel's integrity been sacrificed to sanction the violence that accompanies legal systems? The weight of New Testament ethical teaching and Church tradition declare there is never a need for Christians to inflict violent retributive punishment.

### Prayer

God, our Rock and our great Redeemer,  
by your Holy Spirit open our minds  
and lead us into your truth,  
for the sake of our Savior Jesus Christ,  
in whose name we pray. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Luke 6:37-42

### Reflection

If we step back from our casual acceptance of current criminal justice practices, we will notice how much violence, through dehumanizing incarceration and death, nations and states are dealing to offenders. How much suffering is enough? Or in the language of the Bible, just what "measure" should we use? "Day in and day out we send people to jail...or make them do things they do not want to do, under coercion of force, and we justify all of this by speaking of such persons as having broken the law," leading political philosopher Ronald Dworkin has written. Yet, he worries, "Even in clear cases...we are not able to give a satisfactory account of what that means" (emphasis added).

When Andrew Skotnicki takes up the challenge to explain what breaking the law means and what the resulting punishments ought to be, at least for Christians, his account will make us uneasy with modern systems of justice. For the following reasons, he thinks "the weight of the New Testament and of the tradition of the Church declares that there is never a need for Christians to inflict violent retributive punishment on anyone."

- ▶ *The weight of Scripture leans strongly toward mercy, forgiveness, and love toward those who harm us, rather than "retribution" in the sense of vengeful, violent punishment.*<sup>1</sup> Skotnicki writes, "Attempts to elevate discrete sayings in the Gospels that hint at anything less than unconditional regard for all distort the unity, simplicity, and benevolence of the message of Christ."
- ▶ *Through much of their history, Christians were wary, even fearful, of bringing harm on the guilty. Crimes were adjudicated by the Church as offenses against another and against God. If mediators could not settle a dispute between offender and victim, they sought sworn testimony from reliable witnesses. Since most Christians were "convinced that only God could judge another, and only a direct sign from God could justify bringing harm," other strategies were needed to determine innocence or guilt. For example, an ordeal assigned the judgment to God; a trial by jury forced a few people to do the morally dangerous act of judging.*

Beginning in the twelfth century, new codes of law – first canon law and then secular legal systems – changed this landscape by construing offenses as violations of law and affronts to the state.



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This “new source of moral accountability not only competed with the gospel but routinely trumped its authority,” Skotnicki notes with regret, and many “granted modern law and its punitive function a primary place in determining the demands incumbent upon Christians and the legitimate means to do violence to those who broke the law.”

- ▶ *Monastic prisons, from the sixth century, focused on penitence and restoration.* (Secular prisons, which were rare before the nineteenth century, have departed from these goals.) Monks who violated seriously the communal rules might be confined in a cell after the correctional process taught by Christ (Matthew 18:15-17) was followed. Skotnicki observes that in this process “one thing is essential: the love of the shepherd for the lost sheep. The monk must not be made to endure a suffering that stifles conversion and furthers isolation. Rather, . . . each prisoner must have a wise and holy monk to accompany him through the labyrinth of penance and the necessary pain that accompanies the journey to spiritual and communal health.”

Skotnicki fears that any attempt to justify the modern penal system must wrongly “hallow the state as a necessary bulwark against disorder, law as a source of moral legitimacy, and Scripture as accommodating both.”

### Study Questions

1. Why did most Christians prior to the twelfth century believe that judging an offender’s innocence or guilt was morally dangerous to them, according to Andrew Skotnicki? What practices did they develop to avoid making such judgments?
2. What did punishment mean and what limits were put on its severity in monastic prisons? What explains the differences between monastic prisons and secular prisons today?
3. What guidance do you find in the history of Christian attitudes toward punishment that Skotnicki sketches?

### Departing Hymn: “Search, Lord, Our Spirits in Your Sight”

Search, Lord, our spirits in your sight,  
in best and worst reveal us;  
shed on our souls a blaze of light,  
and judge, that you may heal us.  
The present be our judgment day,  
when all our lack you do survey.  
Show us ourselves and save us.

Lo, fearing naught we come to you,  
though by our fault confounded;  
though selfish, mean, base things we do,  
your justice is unbounded:  
so large, it naught but love requires,  
and judging, pardons, frees, inspires.  
Deliver us from evil!

*Percy Dearmer* (1925), adapted<sup>2</sup>

*Suggested Tunes:* MIT FREUDEN ZART or KIRKEN DEN ER ET

<sup>1</sup> For more detailed study of the biblical material, see Chris Marshall’s “Divine Justice as Restorative Justice” which is discussed in the previous study guide.

<sup>2</sup> This text is based on “Thou Judge by Whom Each Empire Fell” (vv. 2 and 3).



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### Focus Article:

📖 Restorative Justice:  
The New Way Forward  
(*Prison*, pp. 29-35)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Resources for Restorative  
Justice  
(*Prison*, pp. 89-93)

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# Restorative Justice: The New Way Forward

Can we reform the justice system and prisons in ways that restore lives and transform individuals injured by crime? Restorative justice promises to move away from warehousing offenders and toward a system that leads offenders to personal accountability and allows victims to heal.

### Prayer

Scripture Reading: Lamentations 3:22-23

Responsive Reading (based on Psalm 118)

Let those who fear the LORD say,  
“**Our God’s steadfast love endures forever.**”

Out of my distress I called out,  
the LORD answered me and set me free.

**The LORD is my strength  
and my song and my salvation.**

I shall not die but I shall live  
and recount the deeds of the LORD.

**Our God’s steadfast love endures forever.**

### Reflection

Could there be a more miserable victim than the poet of Lamentations – a witness to the obliteration of Jerusalem, the Temple, and the treasured way of life of God’s people, who now honestly acknowledges the doom was permitted by God’s righteous anger (Lamentations 3:1)? No wonder God seems to be a fearsome animal ready to pounce (3:10-11), a terrible warrior bent on destruction (3:12-13). Yet from the anguished communal memories springs a hope that “the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases” and a prayer to God, “great is your faithfulness” (3:22-23).

Of course, we cannot draw a straight line from this poet to any other victim of a terrible crime. Each one carries a singular burden. However, feeling cut off from God and community, and yearning for restoration are very common. And these victim-experiences are not addressed well in our current justice system.

Having witnessed the great suffering caused by crime, both to victims and their loved ones, and to offenders and their families, Lisa Rea asks, “How should we respond in ways that seek to restore lives and transform individuals injured by crime?”

She commends restorative justice principles that treat crime as “not an offense of a criminal against the state, but an offense committed by one individual (the offender) against other individuals (the victims). For this reason, the justice system should hold offenders accountable (as directly as possible) for restoring (as much as possible) the victims or their families. Restorative justice acknowledges that crime breaks the peace within communities. Offenders, therefore, must make things right with the community as well, if possible.”

- ▶ *To victims of crime, restorative justice offers participation in the administration of justice. This might include a “non-coercive [meeting] by victims and offenders and other stake holders; facilitated mediation, with adequate preparation; acceptance*



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of responsibility by the offender expressed in apology, changed behavior, and restitution; and reintegration of victims and offenders into the community in ways that provide safety, dignity and respect, material help, and moral and spiritual guidance," writes Kenneth Carder. A recent study notes this "can bring closure on issues of fear, vulnerability, personal security and even self-blame: victims are often dogged by questions like: 'Why me?' which can find resolution in meeting the offender or communicating with the offender indirectly through a mediator. Some victims value the opportunity to tell the offender how the crime affected them."<sup>1</sup>

► *For offenders, restorative justice may encourage reform by prompting "a recognition of the wrong they have done, and of how this harms not just others but also themselves. This is the first point in a crucial process; from it grows repentance, which couples the act of acknowledgment of wrongdoing with a turning to seek forgiveness. And from that flows the atonement which involves an attempt to make reparation in some way."*<sup>2</sup> Rea has observed the "transformation of offenders [as] evidenced by the reduction of recidivism rates." These face-to-face meetings have the surprising result of reducing "crime more effectively with more, rather than less, serious crimes and more consistently with crimes involving personal victims than with so-called property crimes," Carder reports.

"While restorative justice is no simple panacea, it does offer a broader lens, different goals, and alternative practices to retribution and incarceration," Carder concludes. "Communities of faith are uniquely equipped with a narrative of restorative justice to contribute to the conversation."

### Study Questions

1. Lisa Rea writes, "Crime victims often speak of feeling left out of the justice system. Some have told me they feel used by the system, like they are just pawns in its game to convict and sentence the offender." What do crime victims want and need that the justice system is not providing?
2. When she directed the Texas Sycamore Tree Project "that brings together (surrogate) victims and offenders to talk in small groups about crime," Rea noticed that "often inmates do not think about their victims." The current criminal justice system "does not require prison inmates to face their victims and seek to make things right with them." How does restorative justice address this shortcoming?
3. Do you have any concerns about victim-offender meetings? How might these concerns be addressed?
4. How might congregations participate best in restorative criminal justice?

### Departing Hymn: "When Asked, Who Is My Neighbor?"

<sup>1</sup> The Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, *A Place of Redemption: A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prison* (2004), §31, available online at [http://catholic-ew.org.uk/media/files/cbcew\\_publications/a\\_place\\_of\\_redemption](http://catholic-ew.org.uk/media/files/cbcew_publications/a_place_of_redemption).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, §30.



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### Focus Articles:

📖 Sermons in a Swiss Prison  
(*Prison*, pp. 55-61)

📖 Spiritual Friendship:  
Portrait of a Prison  
Ministry  
(*Prison*, pp. 62-66)

### Suggested Article:

📖 Dehumanized Prisoners  
(*Prison*, pp. 38-40)

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# Spiritual Friendships with Prisoners

If those on the outside are unwilling to be on the receiving end as well as the giving end of the relationship with prisoners, they cannot offer spiritual friendship. Such openness is not easy. It rejects the assumption that those in the free world are by definition better folks than those who are locked up.

### Prayer

Loving God, we praise and thank you for the love and mercy you have shown each of us in Jesus Christ. You have fed us with your Word, and challenged us to love our neighbors as ourselves.

God of justice, we remember before you all prisoners and those who care for them, that they may see in each other your image. We especially pray for prisoners who have been unjustly accused. May those in positions to review evidence seek justice for all, so that your will be done.

We pray in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, who was persecuted, who died that we might live, who rose to reign as the King of Kings, and who will come again to establish his reign of perfect peace. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Isaiah 42:6-8

### Reflection

The worship services which theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) led in the city prison in Basel, Switzerland, near the end of his life were "carefully crafted ... [to] proclaim a specific message," John Thompson reports. The "prayers that bookend each sermon, a brief Scripture verse, the homily, and Communion ... remind prisoner and non-prisoner of the common brotherhood they share through Jesus Christ." The petitionary prayers enlist the congregants in praying and caring for a wide range of people, the Scripture passages focus on God's redeeming love for all through Christ Jesus, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper draws all the participants into the Body of Christ. In *Church Dogmatics* Barth describes how Communion unites all Christians: "They are so linked together by Christ who links himself to them that they 'mutually adapt themselves to be one organism which can be used in the world in His service.'" Communion, he says, makes the Church a "mobile brotherhood," and by concluding the worship services at Basel Prison with this practice Barth included those labeled "prisoner" as a part of this family.

Barth "bears witness to the great gift we might receive when visiting those in prison; a gift that can be known only by those who are willing to follow Jesus behind walls of concrete and bars of iron," Thompson concludes. "To look upon the incarcerated and see not criminals or convicts but rather brothers and sisters, for this is how Jesus sees them, reminds us of the great grace given to us which offers freedom from our chains. Jesus came to free us from our captivity. As we are all delivered captives, we are also all brothers and sisters."

Embracing our equality before God is essential to nurturing spiritual friendships in prison ministry, Dick Allison knows from



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experience. "Everyone involved in a spiritual friendship has 'sinned and come short of the glory of God.' It is equally true that everyone involved is a person of worth, created in the image of God and the object of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ," he writes. "Virtually all the prisoners I have ever known have experienced treatment inside and outside the prison system designed to make them feel less than human. Thus they recognize immediately whether an offer of spiritual friendship is genuine."

He recalls visiting a friend on death row with a colleague. "When we met together, a glass partition separated us from any physical contact with him. We talked to one another through a phone. For two hours he was in chains that made holding the phone uncomfortable for him. The noise in the visitation room was overwhelming, but we did not complain because we could look each other in the eye, smile and laugh, cry and pray. We prayed for him and he prayed for us. We knew that we were not just acquaintances; we were partners in a spiritual friendship."

Allison describes several avenues for developing spiritual friendships with prisoners that he has experienced – through visitation in prison, telephone conversations, personal correspondence, sharing of stories and prayers through newsletters, public advocacy of prisoners' rights, and extending church membership. None of these, he is sure, can be genuine Christian ministry unless they are animated by spiritual friendship.

### Study Questions

1. For Karl Barth, what is the basis for his spiritual friendship with the men in Basel Prison?
2. What are the essential ingredients in spiritual friendship? Are there reasons that we find it difficult to be spiritual friends with prisoners?
3. How does each of the six practices described by Dick Allison depend upon and foster spiritual friendship? Discuss how your congregation can participate in some of these practices.
4. Discuss how Francisco Goya depicts the theological travesty of the dehumanization of prisoners in *Third of May, 1808*.

### Departing Hymn: "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing!" (verses 1, 4, and 8)

Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing  
my great Redeemer's praise,  
the glories of my God and King,  
the triumphs of his grace!

He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
he sets the prisoner free;  
his blood can make the foulest clean,  
his blood availed for me.

Glory to God, and praise and love  
be ever, ever given,  
by saints below and saints above,  
the church in earth and heaven.

Charles Wesley (1739)

Tune: AZMON



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### Focus Articles:

- 📖 Reading for Life: Portrait of a Prison Ministry  
(*Prison*, pp. 67-73)
  
- 📖 Project TURN: Portrait of a Prison Ministry  
(*Prison*, pp. 74-78)
  
- 📖 The Hospitality House: Portrait of a Prison Ministry  
(*Prison*, pp. 79-83)

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# Portraits of Prison Ministry

Prison ministry takes many creative forms – reading novels and discussing virtue with juvenile delinquents, providing an oasis of hospitality for those who have traveled far for a visit with an incarcerated friend or family member, or seminary students and prisoners studying theology together. In each case, as Sarah Jobe writes, “We go to prison not because Jesus told us to, but because Jesus is there.”

### Prayer

Loving God, we thank and praise you for calling us your children, for taking us by the hand and protecting us, showing mercy to the poor, to those in prison, and to all in need of your love.

Equip us for service in the world you love. We offer you now our hands and our hearts, all that we are, that you may receive all the glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

### Reflection

Jesus’ parable of the sheep and goats is not really a “to-do list,” Sarah Jobe observes. “Jesus does not offer eternal life because his followers have done these works of mercy... [or] followed orders.” Rather, it is “a roadmap for those of us looking for Jesus.... To those seeking him, Jesus explains, ‘I’m standing in line at your local food pantry; you’re welcome to come stand with me. I’m confined to a hospice bed, so you’ll have to come to my house to visit. I’m locked up at your local prison, and I’m desperately in need of friends.’”

Jobe directs Project TURN, a program that teaches seminary-style classes in several North Carolina prisons. Before this, she admits, “I just did not think to look for Jesus in prison at all. While I might have felt some responsibility to bring Jesus into prisons, I certainly would not have gone there looking for him. I would not have looked for Jesus in prison because I live in a society that understands ‘inmates’ to be fundamentally different from ‘the rest of us.’” Once she identified this mindset – she calls it our “criminal anthropology” that assumes everyone incarcerated is “manipulative, deceptive, and untrustworthy” and “Once a felon, always a felon” – she saw it everywhere. And then she saw that it was false, and ran totally counter to what the Bible says. “The Bible suggests that when we look at one another, we should be able to see the face of God shining out. When we learn to see the shocking beauty of God in another person, we learn to see their immeasurable worth.”

This change to see prisoners anew and rightly with “the eyes of your heart” is common to all three innovative ministries to juvenile and adult offenders and their families featured here.

- ▶ In *Project TURN*, Duke Divinity School students take in-prison classes beside their incarcerated brothers and sisters. The carefully selected readings, writing projects involving revision of multiple drafts, and open discussions invite all classmates to contribute fully from their varied backgrounds. The project’s name TURN, an acronym for “Transform, Unlock, ReNew,” was inspired by the Apostle Paul’s teaching that we be transformed by the renewal of our minds as we are united to other members of Christ’s Body



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(Romans 12:2-8). "So, each week we go into prison seeking... the pieces of theological reflection that become missing in a society willing to silence huge swaths of its population," Jobe explains.

- ▶ The *Reading for Life* program in St. Joseph County, IN, uses guided reflection on literature to nurture the moral imagination in juvenile offenders. Students meet with trained mentors to learn about classical and theological virtues, read some novels together, journal on relevant questions, and discuss the character implications in the readings and their writings. Then they plan and execute a related act of community service. By starting with the young people where they are, really listening to their life concerns, and having realistic expectations for their accomplishments, mentors seek to counter the dehumanization that juvenile offenders often experience in the justice system. Mentors see remarkable growth in students' skills and character. "Young people need to be heard; and we need to be patient enough to hear them without judgment or condescension, without having all the answers," program director Alesha Seroczynski writes. "It is very important that they find the virtuous path themselves."
- ▶ Through the *Central Texas Hospitality House* in Gatesville, TX, volunteers provide an oasis of care for those who have traveled a great distance to visit a friend or family member incarcerated in one of the six state prisons in the town. "We offer food and drink, a place of comfort for the hours while waiting to go into prison, needed clothing for visitation, and a quiet place for someone who feels ill," explains Mary Alice Wise, a founding member of the ministry. In addition, the Hospitality House partners with chaplains and ministries in the prison units. For instance, it "is seeking ways to support the families of women [in a faith-based dorm], so that when inmates return home, they find healthy support for those changes and do not revert to old habits."

### Study Questions

1. What does Sarah Jobe mean by the "criminal anthropology" that pervades our culture? How is it opposed to a biblical view of human beings? Discuss how each of the three ministries featured here counter that anthropology.
2. Sarah Jobe says Project TURN classes are "demonstration plots in which people might imagine different ways to exist with one another across social divisions" rather than "advocacy work" for prison reform. What does she mean? Does her distinction apply to the other two ministries as well?
3. What spiritual gifts are being exercised by the volunteers in these three ministries? Do the ministries require the same or different gifts from participants?
4. In light of your community's needs and church members' gifts, what form of prison ministry seems most appropriate?

Departing Hymn: "When Asked, Who Is My Neighbor?"

# Appendix: Optional Lesson Plans for Teachers

For each study guide we offer two or three optional lesson plans followed by detailed suggestions on using the material in the study guide:

- ▶ An *abridged lesson plan* outlines a lesson suitable for a beginning Bible study class or a brief group session.
- ▶ A *standard lesson plan* outlines a more thorough study.
- ▶ For some guides a *dual session lesson plan* divides the study guide material so that the group can explore the topic in two meetings.

Each lesson plan is for a 30- to 45-minute meeting, with about one-third of the time being set aside for worship.

# Divine Justice as Restorative Justice

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To discuss the meaning of “retribution” and identify retributive elements in the biblical account of justice.
2. To trace the theme of restorative justice in four levels of biblical material.
3. To reflect on the importance of interpreting Scripture in a holistic, canonical way.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” locate the familiar tune LAUDA ANIMA in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Comment

“The Bible has a particular insight to offer on the question of justice. The Old Testament portrays God as just or righteous. Often the portrait is of God passing judgment on the unfaithfulness of his people. But God’s justice is not that of an impartial judge adjudicating between the claims of competing or conflicting peoples to achieve peace and harmony. It is manifest also in deeds that liberate the weak and vulnerable from bondage, and which require his people to act in ways conducive to human flourishing....”

“The traditional symbol of justice—as a blindfolded woman with a pair of scales—is thus not adequate. Biblical justice and legal justice are not one and the same thing. *True justice must have an inherent bias toward the marginalized, vulnerable or oppressed individuals in society.*” (The Catholic Bishops of England and Wales, *A Place of Redemption: A Christian Approach to Punishment and Prison* [2004], §§ 22-23. This document is available online at [www.catholic-ew.org.uk/Catholic-Church/Publications](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/Catholic-Church/Publications), accessed January 10, 2012).

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God for insight into divine righteousness and justice, and our call to participate in it.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 32:16-18 from a modern translation.

## Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

## Reflection

Our starting point for reflection on the contemporary prison system is Chris Marshall’s survey of biblical teachings about corrective or criminal justice, the domain of justice that identifies and penalizes wrongdoing. He offers a holistic survey of the Bible, believing that its major themes of restorative justice—at the *linguistic level* of recurring terminology for justice, the *macro level* of the meta-narrative, the *legislative level* of particular instructions for dealing with wrongdoing, and the *ecclesial level* of church discipline—will help us interpret particularly difficult passages.

If your group would like to extend their study of the biblical teachings on criminal justice, see Chris Marshall's *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), which includes a careful discussion of passages on capital punishment. Kenneth Carder reviews this book in "Resources for Restorative Justice" (*Prison*, 89-93).

### Study Questions

1. Chris Marshall notes that "retribution" is a "confusing and misunderstood" concept. "When the word is used in isolation, it tends to evoke the idea of vengeance or retaliation. When it is paired with the word 'justice' however, it implies a more measured delivery of punishment as due recompense for wrongdoing." Only in the latter sense is retribution ever endorsed in Scripture. "Most basically, the Bible recognizes that human deeds carry inescapable consequences. There is a kind of inbuilt law of recompense in the universe that means people 'reap whatever they sow' (Galatians 6:7, cf. Ecclesiastes 10:8; Proverbs 1:32; 26:27; Psalm 7:15-16). In addition, the basic retributive concepts of guilt, desert, proportionality, and atonement are widely attested in the Old Testament legal and cultic system, and undergird moral and theological teaching in the New Testament as well. Furthermore, since God is inherently just, and God's judgments are never capricious, biblical accounts of divine judgment on sin, both within history and at the end of time, may also be regarded as demonstrations of retributive justice.... Accordingly, biblical justice is retributive justice insofar as it turns on the principles of moral culpability, measured recompense, and the rule of law."
2. Marshall gives two major reasons to avoid proof texting. First, we should humbly admit that our ability to understand justice is limited by our fallen nature. In Scripture "justice *does* have an objective existence, because justice derives from God (Deuteronomy 32:3-4; Psalm 89:14; 145:17), and God exists apart from human speculation," but "Just as our human capacity to know God and the truth about God is limited by sin (cf. Romans 1:18-23), so too is our capacity to know fully the nature of God's universal justice." Second, our ability to grasp the meaning of justice is limited by our creaturely finitude: we can only experience justice through the lens of our particular cultural and historical traditions. As a result, our knowledge "can only be partial, fallible, and provisional." These two reasons should make us cautious, though not despairing, in interpreting the biblical materials. The best approach is to read the Bible canonically, as an organized volume that communicates the story of God's grace that we learn about and live through the Church.
3. You can use Scripture reading and responsive reading passages to briefly survey what Marshall says about the *linguistic level*. If members are reminded of elements of the great story of Scripture as it is read by the Church (creation, rebellion, restoration through Israel, exile, restoration through the Church, consummation), they will understand Marshall's view of the *macro level*.

You might form smaller groups to investigate the Scripture passages related to the *legislative* and *ecclesial levels*. The group studying the legislative level should focus on Marshall's interpretation of Numbers 5:6-7, Leviticus 6:1-7, and Exodus 22:1, 4, and 9. Ask the group studying the ecclesial level to summarize his interpretation of Galatians 6:1 and 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, 10-11.

Members might have questions about each of these levels. Do these levels provide any direct instructions at all about criminal justice today? If not, do they suggest restorative justice principles that should guide our thinking about criminal justice? Are there particular passages that seem to conflict with these principles?

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# The Measure with which We Measure

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To consider why most Christians before the twelfth century were wary of passing judgment on offenders, no matter how certain and heinous was their guilt.
2. To review the meaning of punishment in monastic prisons.
3. To discuss the application today of the restorative justice principles from this long Christian era before the establishment of systems of law, either ecclesial or secular.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Search, Lord, Our Spirits in Your Sight” locate one of the suggested tunes MIT FREUDEN ZART or KIRKEN DEN ER ET in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

As Christians, how should we weigh or measure the punishment for criminals? Andrew Skotnicki noticed the varied responses after Troy Davis was executed by lethal injection in Georgia in September, 2011. He recalls, “There were the usual post-mortems. A relative of Davis’s alleged victim felt peace; proponents of retributive justice were satisfied that the giving and getting ratio had been balanced; others lamented the death of a man who, after twenty years, hardly resembled the young adult who first entered prison and whose conviction for killing an off-duty police officer during an altercation was based on the testimony of some witnesses who later recanted their statements. The most striking comment on Davis’s fate, in my opinion, came from the noted theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, who rightly articulated the meaning of the event fully within the orbit of Christian ethics: ‘As Christians, we receive our salvation from the justifying righteousness of God. We reject all forms of retributive justice. We reject the death penalty in the name of God.’”

Skotnicki concludes, “Whatever our own belief concerning the position taken by Moltmann on the legitimacy of what he calls ‘retributive justice,’ he challenges Christians to remember that we are first of all followers of Christ and, as such, must make him the measure against which we measure all that we do.” (*Prison*, 20)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading together the prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 6:37-42 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study takes the Christian critique of modern prisons one step further. The previous study guide followed Chris Marshall’s “Divine Justice as Restorative Justice” in focusing on scriptural teachings about corrective or criminal justice; this one follows Andrew Skotnicki in tracing the major developments in Christian attitudes toward penology after the time of the early church. Whereas Skotnicki uses “retribution” exclusively with a

negative connotation of the vengeful use of violence in service of the state, Marshall uses this word in a neutral sense when he claims there are retributive elements in the biblical view of justice. Both authors agree that the weight of Scripture supports restorative principles of justice. Furthermore, they agree that Christians should work to reform social institutions with the same principles of justice that guide their treatment of one another in the Church. This is why Skotnicki believes the history of monastic prisons and Christian attitudes toward judging offenders are applicable to our current situation.

### Study Questions

1. Assign individuals to read aloud Matthew 7:3, Luke 6:38, and Luke 12:14, and to describe their biblical context. Discuss how each passage cautions disciples about judging other persons' guilt or assigning them punishment. What is it about our human knowledge and motives that should give us pause in making judicial judgments?

Skotnicki describes two practices — ordeal and trial by jury — that allow (at least most) people to avoid making judicial judgments of guilt and punishment. He writes, "In brief, the defendant would be taken to the local church; a special oration would be made by the priest invoking God's intervention in determining innocence or guilt; the culprit would have to grasp a red hot iron or submerge a hand in boiling water; the wound would be bandaged and after several days, again in church, the bandage would be removed. If healing was taking place, the defendant was innocent. As legal historian James Whitman insists, the ordeal was not instituted in order 'to get the facts straight about the incident in question,' but in order to 'spare human beings the responsibility of judgment.'" The same explanation holds for the origins of trial by jury. It was not a reform aimed at improving judicial procedure or a sign of democratic sentiment, it was a way for rulers and magistrates to compel others to engage in the morally fearsome task of judging and bringing harm upon another, thus sparing themselves from what they believed would be the judgment of God upon them. Simply put, our Christian ancestors were at that time by and large convinced that only God could judge another, and only a direct sign from God could justify bringing harm upon another, no matter how transparent or heinous the person's guilt."

2. Imprisonment is often defended today as necessary to *prevent* the offender from committing further crimes, to *deter* other people from committing similar crimes, or to *set accounts straight* with regard to the law. Monastic prisons, by contrast, had a restorative purpose "based on the conviction that the incarcerated need no additional suffering other than that produced in the refusal to honor and love the image of God imprinted upon all of creation and upon themselves. It also is based on the certainty that silence, solitude, prayer, work, and spiritual counsel are the soul's great healers, and that they alone can bring persons to their true selves hidden with Christ in God." Skotnicki believes this "culture of monasticism reveals the blueprint for drawing the Spirit out from a heart encrusted with its own petty and destructive desires and hurts."

Skotnicki traces the shift in the meaning of punishment to the rise of canon law in the twelfth century and its influence on later secular legal systems. At that point, "the absolution given in the sacrament of confession for a public offense bestowed forgiveness from God, but was insufficient to merit forgiveness from the Church. Secular polities based not only their legal codes and the punitive sentences that are their necessary complement upon canon law, they also, like the Church, helped to remove Christ more and more from the equation in understanding the meaning of a criminal act."

3. Assign two small groups to search for guidance from Christian reluctance to judge offenders and from monastic penology. Does the former suggest a new appreciation for the jury system, or a reason for Christians to avoid participation in it? Does the latter call into question the meaning of incarceration today and provide directions for prison reform, or does it motivate certain kinds of Christian prison ministries?

### Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Restorative Justice: The New Way Forward

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To understand the central features of restorative justice practices.
2. To review the effect of restorative justice practices on crime victims and offenders.
3. To consider how congregations can participate best in restorative justice practices.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

## Begin with Two Stories

Lisa Rea really listens to the stories of violent crime victims that she seeks out as she advocates for restorative justice. These two stories remind us of the wide suffering caused by crime and exacerbated by a sometimes insensitive justice system. Rea writes, 'I knew a few details of how [Roberta] Roper's daughter Stephanie had been viciously murdered. That night at dinner I asked the simple question that is so important to ask a victim of crime, 'Will you tell me your story?' Mrs. Roper explained the unimaginable violence that took her daughter away from her in 1982. Stephanie's car had broken down on a rural road not far from the family's property as she was returning from college. She was kidnapped, raped, tortured, and murdered, and then the offenders set her car on fire. I will never forget the visceral effect of hearing this story from this distraught mother.... It struck me how often Mrs. Roper must tell this story and thus relive it herself each time.

'A few years earlier after speaking at a restorative justice conference at Fresno Pacific University on the need for more opportunities to bring victims and offenders together, I was approached by a woman from the audience. She began to tell me her story. Her son had committed a heinous murder, killing the victim with a baseball bat. With great pain in her face, this mother explained how she tried to reach out to the family members of the victim of her son's violence. She wanted to tell them how very sorry she was for her son's horrible actions. When she reached out to the family in a courtroom setting, she was rebuffed, and it was a very painful moment for her. This mother of the offender told me how important it was to move the justice system towards restorative justice, to bring victims and offenders together to meet. I will never forget that day.' (*Prison*, 30-31)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God's mercy on all persons, victims and offenders, who seek restoration in their lives marred by violent crime.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Lamentations 3:22-23 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study outlines the restorative justice principles which have been commended by several authors in this issue, and stresses their benefit for both crime victims and offenders. If your group would like to learn more about this emerging movement to reform the criminal justice system, consider using the materials reviewed in "Resources for Restorative Justice."

## Study Questions

1. Lisa Rea suggests “Crime victims have questions that go unanswered unless there is some kind of contact with the offender. They want to ask questions such as these: Why was I, or my family, targeted? How did my loved one die? Was she in pain? How long did it take for her to die? They want to know answers that only the offender knows. That is the primary reason that crime victims take part in a restorative justice dialogue. They also express fears about the offender committing another crime against them or their family, when or if the offender is released. Victims want to see offenders take responsibility for their actions; many hope offenders will express remorse. All these questions and concerns motivate victims to seek restorative justice because they hold out some hope for healing....”

Furthermore, restorative justice can help victims and others understand the main goal of punishment, recognizing “that the perpetrator and the victim are members of society who both need reintegrating into something like normality” (*A Place of Redemption*, §31).

2. Restorative justice offers to bring offenders together with their victims, or with surrogate victims (volunteers who have been victims of crime), for voluntary, mediated conversation about the effect of their crime on victims, their families, and communities. Rea warns that “Many states prohibit and most all of them discourage contact between prison inmates and their victims. Yet, it is precisely through this type of victim-offender dialogue that many offenders may express remorse to their victims, who are no longer faceless, and may be transformed by taking responsibility for their actions more directly.”

In addition to changing offenders’ perception of their actions, she believes “in-prison restorative justice programs [can move] the justice system towards an orientation that acknowledges the effect of crime on victims.”

3. Members might express concern that victims will feel pressured to do something they are not ready to do – e.g., to face the offender, forgive the offender, change how they feel about their loss, and so on. “To make a victim feel an obligation to participate could amount to a revictimization.” To avoid this, the meetings are purely voluntary, and trained mediators are present before and during the session to help victims make wise decisions about whether and how to proceed. Victims’ desires may vary from wanting “no involvement at all to a variety of levels of engagement – perhaps accepting a letter of apology, asking for and being given information about the crime or the progress of the case, providing relevant information about the effects of the crime on them, accepting direct practical reparation or suggesting alternative community reparation, indirect mediation or a meeting with the offender.”

Members may be concerned that offenders will manipulate the meeting to their advantage. Again, a trained mediator can help prevent this.

Another concern is that victims may “have unrealistic and oppressive expectations of the offender’s obligations.... [W]e must be careful never to allow the understandable anger of an individual victim – still less the prejudice of public opinion – to determine decisions. Criminal justice must not be reduced to the whim of a public clamour which so often will be weighted against the marginalized.” (*A Place of Redemption*, §32)

4. Prison Fellowship International ([www.pfi.org](http://www.pfi.org)) provides Bible studies on restorative justice and sponsors a week of Prayer and Transformation for guided prayer and outreach activities. This organization and others can point you to the specialized training that restorative justice mediation requires. More importantly, members can become spiritual friends with congregants who have suffered from violent crime as victims or offenders.

## Departing Hymn

“When Asked, Who is My Neighbor?” is on pp. 41-43 of *Prison*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Spiritual Friendship with Prisoners

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To recall Karl Barth's sermons and worship services in Basel prison as an inspiration for developing spiritual friendships with prisoners.
2. To identify the nature of spiritual friendship and consider why we may find it difficult to nurture spiritual friendships with people who are incarcerated.
3. To explore specific practices for nurturing spiritual friendships with prisoners.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 8-9 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the two focus articles and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Oh, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing!" locate the tune AMZON in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

In the sermons and worship services in Basel Prison, the theologian Karl Barth constantly emphasized the spiritual brotherhood in Jesus Christ that he and the prisoners shared. Dick Allison tells a story that reveals how important this has been in his spiritual friendships with prisoners. Six of those fifteen friends are members of University Baptist Church in Hattiesburg, MS. "I had the privilege of baptizing three of those men in prison horse troughs following their declarations of faith," Allison writes. "The other one, who is in prison in Georgia, will be baptized as soon as it can be arranged. He is utterly serious about his commitment to Christ and to the Church. Knowing that I have baptized the others during their imprisonment, he says, 'I want to become a member of the Horse Trough Fraternity of Baptized Believers.'"

"...There are different levels of spiritual friendship, but it is fair to say that being a part of a body of believers has a profound influence on those who ask for membership. One of the men that I baptized four years ago talked about it again in a letter just a few days ago. And all of them have expressed on numerous occasions what a joy it is to them to feel like they 'belong to a real church.' One says that it is the first time he ever belonged to anything except a 'gang of skinheads.'" (*Prison*, 65)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide together.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 42:6-8 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study and the next, "Portraits of Prison Ministry," build upon the theological critique of the prison system by articulating some positive ministry responses. At the heart of Christian ministry generally is the formation of spiritual friendships that recognize and embrace our spiritual equality before God. In this study, Karl Barth's ministry in Basel Prison provides a winsome foundation for spiritual friendship with prisoners, and Dick Allison outlines six practices that nurture spiritual relationships with his incarcerated friends. The next study will introduce three innovative ministries to juvenile and adult offenders and their families.

## Study Questions

1. In a sermon about Christ's crucifixion between two thieves, "The Criminals with Him," Karl Barth writes, "If anyone identified himself with prisoners it was [Jesus Christ].... That is the Lord who has mercy on you: this prisoner who is your liberator, the liberator of us all." From the themes in Barth's sermons and the structure of the worship services in Basel Prison, John Thompson concludes that Barth emphasizes "the common brotherhood between prisoner and non-prisoner.... Barth challenges the readers to find solidarity with prisoners; to tear down any dichotomy between the two categories. To do so is to follow Jesus who identified with prisoners. Barth is only asking us to do the same as Christ's disciples."
2. Spiritual friendship goes beyond loving someone and helping that person in practical ways. As a *friendship*, it must be reciprocal; as Dick Allison notes, it "works both ways, with its benefits extending to both parties." It is *spiritual* because the friends' mutual love is grounded in shared spiritual equality: though each one has "sinned and come short of the glory of God," it is equally true that each one "is a person of worth, created in the image of God and the object of God's redeeming love in Jesus Christ." Believing this, they can support one another in prayer, worship, study, service to others, and growth in discipleship. Allison admits that sometimes "those on the outside of prisons are not willing to be on the receiving end as well as the giving end of the relationship." He warns that such "openness is not easy. We must get rid of stereotypes. We must get rid of pride that assumes that those in the free world are by definition better folks than those who are locked up." Perhaps it is easier if we have known persons before they were incarcerated. Invite members to share their experiences of friendship with prisoners.
3. Divide members into several small groups to explore the practices. The fifth one, sharing church membership, may be compared with Karl Barth's sharing Communion with the men in Basel Prison: it reminds us of our spiritual equality and mutual responsibilities as members of the Body of Christ. The first three practices – visitation, phone conversations, correspondence – emphasize the need to "keep in touch" with our friends, to share our lives as best we can through regular communication of needs and joys, prayers for one another, and worship with one another. The fourth practice – sharing of our lives through contributions in a newsletter – is a joint activity that draws us together with one another and in service to others. The final practice of advocating for prisoners' rights may seem the most one-sided activity, but it unites us with prisoners in their concerns.

Are members of your congregation or of their extended families incarcerated? If so, they might be the bridge to begin some of these practices of spiritual friendship with prisoners.

4. Francisco Goya's *Third of May, 1808 in Madrid: The Executions on Principe Pio Hill* recalls the scandalous execution of Spanish prisoners by Napoleon's troops. Instead of presenting warfare as noble and strong, Goya emphasizes its senseless brutality and anonymity. He puts the episode into theological relief, Hornik notes, by depicting the prisoner who is about to be killed at point blank range as wearing "a white shirt and yellow pants – the colors of the papacy – and [standing] in the pose of Christ on the cross. A wound is visible on his open, right hand suggesting a stigmata, or open wound that resembles Christ's woundedness. These prisoners are not Christian martyrs, however; they are fearful of the torture and death that is about to happen to them. A church building is visible in the background, but it is in darkness both compositionally and in the minds of those awaiting certain death." She suggests both the Spanish rebels and their executioners "are imprisoned by what they think is their duty to the modern nation state – to save and defend Spain, or to serve France and its brutal expansionist policy."

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.

# Portraits of Prison Ministry

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To offer a Christian critique of a prevailing view of offenders in our culture, which Sarah Jobe calls the “criminal anthropology.”
2. To introduce three innovative Christian ministries to offenders and their families.
3. To consider the needs in your community and spiritual gifts in your congregation for creating or participating in a prison ministry.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Prison (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the three short focus articles before the group meeting.

## Begin with Some Letters

As the chapel counselors for Women’s Death Row in Gatesville, TX, Mary Alice and Charlie Wise visit each woman there for two hours each week. They invited the four who regularly attend their small group to describe how visits from friends and family members help them.

“They are a life line, because the people that come to see us are really our only contact with the world, besides our letters,” writes Chelsea Richardson. “They are an incentive to stay out of trouble, to keep hanging in there when we want to give up; a highlight to our day, week, month, and (for some) years. They are as a family reunion or a holiday with your beloved family and friends. A reminder that we do matter; that we are not alone, we are not forgotten, and we have a chance to refocus our minds and goals. We live in a place full of drama, pressures, stress, no privacy, and where it is so easy to feel forgotten, alone, hopeless, and to fall into despair.”

Lisa Coleman writes, “Seeing my family and friends lets me know that I’m not forgotten; and that I am loved and cared for. It’s like sunshine...it brightens my lonely, sad days. And brings a smile to both my heart and face.”

Linda Carty writes, “As water is to three days of continual running, so are visits to an incarcerated inmate.” Darlie Routier writes that “visits from family and friends are like having hugs wrapped around my heart ... a connection of heart strings.” Those on death row cannot have any contact visits. Glass and wire form a barrier. (*Prison*, 81)

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer in the study guide together.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 25:31-46 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

This study introduces three innovative ministries to juvenile and adult offenders and their families. Each ministry encourages the formation of spiritual friendships between ministry volunteers and offenders, which

breaks down the dehumanizing view of offenders in our culture that Sarah Jobe calls the “criminal anthropology.” For additional information about the three ministries featured here, please see these websites: Project TURN ([www.newmonasticism.org/turn.php](http://www.newmonasticism.org/turn.php)), Reading for Life ([ireadforlife.org](http://ireadforlife.org)), and the Central Texas Hospitality House ([www.cthhouse.org](http://www.cthhouse.org)).

### Study Questions

1. Sarah Jobe uses “criminal anthropology” for the “prevalent idea that incarcerated people are fundamentally different from non-incarcerated people.” She continues, “The criminal anthropology at work in our culture starts by separating people who have been incarcerated into a permanent sub-category. Being in this group becomes one’s primary label. We label these people felons, offenders, criminals, convicts, and inmates. Even after incarceration ends (if it ends), people in this category continue to be labeled and categorized in this way. Once a felon, always a felon.... As the story goes, this group shares common characteristics. They are manipulative, deceptive, and untrustworthy.... Criminal anthropology serves a very important social function. By marking this group of people as “not quite so human as the rest of us,” it allows those of us who are not incarcerated to treat other men and women inhumanely without any guilt over our inhumane actions.”

She gives two critiques of criminal anthropology: (1) “it is not true that incarcerated people are fundamentally untrustworthy, twisted, and beyond change,” and (2) it contradicts the biblical teaching that all humans are created in God’s image, such that “when we look at one another, we should be able to see the face of God shining out. When we learn to see the shocking beauty of God in another person, we learn to see their immeasurable worth.”

Each ministry puts volunteers in close interaction with offenders and their families; each is grounded in biblical teaching; and each encourages volunteers to develop spiritual friendship with offenders and their families.

2. A demonstration plot is a small area of planted ground where a new farming method, seed, or fertilizer is used to raise a crop. Sometimes it is an experiment to study whether the new way of farming will be productive; other times it is a device to convince hesitant farmers to adopt the promising innovation. Sarah Jobe suggests the Project TURN classes are analogous to demonstration plots: perhaps they are experiments in ways of living (for the seminarians, the incarcerated offenders, the prison administrators, and so on), or they are winsome devices to promote changed attitudes among these groups and the wider public. The other two ministries featured in this study might be seen as demonstration plots for different, but overlapping audiences. For instance, Reading for Life involves juvenile offenders, their families, the people involved in and impacted by their community service, mentors, and others in the juvenile justice system in new ways of living together. The Central Texas Hospitality House involves the people who are incarcerated, their families and friends who visit them, volunteers from local churches, chaplains and people involved in partnering in-prison ministries in new patterns of support and encouragement. In each case the new “crop” might be changed hearts that are open to new and deeper spiritual friendships.
3. These three ministries involve many volunteers with various gifts. In each ministry there are particular tasks – e.g., teaching and participating in theology classes, befriending young people, mentoring young people to read, showing hospitality to strangers, organizing a clothes bank, entertaining children, and so on – that require specific gifts, training, and experience. However, since all of the ministries involve overcoming barriers of prejudice and mistrust, and building spiritual friendships with offenders and their families, they require (and nurture) these same gifts: humility, openness, respect, willingness to learn from others, love for spiritual goods, and so on.
4. Invite members to brainstorm for a few minutes and make a list of creative forms of ministry to offenders and their families that they have experienced or heard about, or would like to explore. As the response to question 3 suggests, there will be *specific* gifts (i.e., required for particular tasks) and *common* gifts (i.e., humility, love for spiritual goods, and so on, essential for any Christian ministry to offenders and their families). Consider how your congregation nurtures the common gifts for these ministries. Discuss members’ specific gifts that might lead them to serve in particular forms of prison ministry.

### Departing Hymn

“When Asked, Who Is My Neighbor?” is on pp. 41-43 of *Prison*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.