



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

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)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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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?"

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), Reading for Life (ireadforlife.org), and the Central Texas Hospitality House (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.