

Suggested sermon outline (short)

Bible passage – Matthew 9 vs 1-13

Introduction

Speakers may wish to set a context by referring to any involvement they or the congregation have in prison ministry, or in experience of crime as offender or victim.

The very short story in Matthew 9 verses 9-13 shows Jesus' attitude to those who have offended.

(In the Bible, tax collectors are often associated with sinners because they were generally corrupt, as in the example of Zacchaeus.)

Jesus recognised that the people he was with had offended

Many prisoners will try to deny or belittle their crimes when you first talk to them. One of the things that Prison Fellowship volunteers find through talking to prisoners is that as the relationship grows, they often become more honest about what they have done.

Whenever Jesus met people, he was discerning about them. He was direct, openly calling his dinner guests "sinners". We don't have to pretend that prisoners have not offended; we don't even love them in spite of their offences. Rather, we show God's love to them because they are offenders, and because of that, they need it.

Jesus got close to them

He didn't harangue them from a distance. He sat round a table with them and engaged in conversation at close quarters. It is the daily experience of people in the criminal justice system to be talked at rather than talked with. As Christians we need to model a different relationship, a Christ-like relationship, by coming alongside them.

(Of course, in a prison context there have to be boundaries for security reasons).

Jesus brought a message of salvation

One of the messages from the Prison Fellowship restorative justice course is "There are reasons why we are the way we are, and excuses are why we stay that way". We acknowledge prisoners' offences but we also offer them hope. Whether we are involved in an openly evangelistic activity such as a Bible study or a neutral activity such as the Sycamore Tree Restorative Justice course, we model to prisoners a different way of life, a Christ-like way of life.

Jesus message to offenders was that he had come to call them and to bring them the Gospel message. The salvation he preached was available to them – as evidenced by his statement to the repentant thief on the cross – “Today, you will be with me in paradise”.

Conclusion

End with a real life story. A first hand story is good if you have one. Two suggested stories that have appeared in the Prison Fellowship magazine “Cell Out” are below.

twelve years to transform...

mySTORY



Growing up I didn't want for anything, there is no story of childhood poverty or mistreatment to explain the path I took; only the feeling that something was missing, that, 'there must be more to life than this'. I was experimenting with alcohol and drugs by the time I was fifteen. There would be a group of us hanging out through football and we did everything together. It started with drink but we moved quickly onto the so called 'recreational' drugs. At no time whatsoever did I think it would go as far as it eventually did. The trouble was, the harder the drugs the harder they come down.

Three years later my father passed away and I soon found myself addicted to Heroin. In the six months that followed my father's death I was arrested eight times for drug-related offences. I received a community-based order and was put on probation for eighteen months. I started this in 1994 and I managed to stay out of bother with the law until 1998.

However, during this period I was drinking like there was no tomorrow and continued to take some 'Downers'. Because I was not 'getting lifted' by the Coppers I thought that I had everything under control. I stumbled on in this way, often stealing to fund my habit. Eventually this all caught up with me and I was arrested countless times for theft. It soon came to the stage where I had no more chances and I was sentenced to twelve months in 1998.

Going into prison for the first time I was scared and alone. I actually wondered how I had got to this point in my life. I came into contact with Prison Fellowship as soon as I went into prison. I heard through one of the other boys that you could go there to get a cup of tea with sugar and a chocolate biscuit. It was also a place where you could drop your guard and be yourself instead of having to wear a mask of some tough guy.

They ran a regular worship service and I would go along to offload. The support they offered was even more vital to me when, just a few weeks later, my girlfriend passed away. On 27th October in 1998 I came back from her funeral and went straight into a Prison Fellowship meeting where they were calling forward anybody who wanted to give their life to Christ. I experienced a strange sensation, one that I cannot put into words. I went forward and, although I didn't understand it, I just knew that it was what I was meant to do - be reunited with God.

However, my transformation didn't happen over night; it took a further twelve years until I was ready to fully commit. Put simply, I still wanted the element of control in my life and every time I

took back this control I ended up working for the Queen (in prison)! I was convicted on thirty-six separate occasions and served the equivalent of a life sentence. Each and every time I went to prison I always said to God 'get me out and I will change' but it was always on my terms, not His.

During these 12 years of going in and out of prison I continued going to church and receiving the support of PF volunteers, but there was a steady progression of things getting darker and darker.

In 2009 I was eventually brought to breaking point. Physically and mentally I crashed and burned. IV drug use had caused blood clots in my legs and large ulcers, my wife had been imprisoned and my beautiful daughter had gone into foster care. I was at my wits end and I finally realised that I couldn't get myself out of the dark place I was in. I cried out to Jesus knowing that He was the only one I could turn to. He gently reminded me that He is God, He is in control and He will work it out.

When I was released for the final time in 2009 **I had just a change of clothes to my name, but I was determined to get my life back on track and to continue to look to Jesus.** He is so

good and faithful I was given a place to stay through a local church and, slowly but surely, the Lord put the pieces of my life back together. He miraculously restored my health, I found a wonderfully supportive church, and 18 months after my release my daughter was returned to me.

When I was arrested it was often for stealing tools and the incredible thing is, that since my release, I have been gifted with a lot of them! I now use these to offer my services free of charge to those who need a helping hand. I am a 'jack of all trades' doing painting, gardening, building work and, thanks to God for restoring my driving licence (another miracle), I also help people with their shopping.

I am grateful for the support of Prison Fellowship volunteers - as without them I would never have been led to Jesus that first time around. I am even more grateful that I am now called to serve with love and I am looking forward to the future.

Neville

the pf perspective

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"The Sycamore Tree course was not only the most relevant and important part of my rehabilitation; it was, without a doubt, the vital step on my journey towards Jesus. My life was an emotionless, asocial, dark tale of criminality, heroin addiction and prison. I never concerned myself with the consequences of my lifestyle; my victims were faceless and without feelings. I failed to acknowledge their existence; they became mere objects to be ignored or perhaps hated. Before Jesus, I never experienced love.

"My childhood was one of poverty, violence and drug abuse. My mother was too busy battling her own demons to worry too much about me or my sisters. I quickly learned that I was better off alone. I isolated myself and soon found the warm intimacy of heroin addiction. I was totally addicted by the time I was 12.

"I quickly climbed the criminal ladder and am now serving an IPP for robbing a security van. Although I had spent 10 years in various prisons, I never contemplated a normal lifestyle. I had done a number of offending behaviour courses, but they had no real impact on me. Human logic is no match for Satan, and he had me firmly in a mentality of bitterness and hatred.

"The seed of the Sycamore Tree course took a while to germinate, but it flourished quickly. There was a lovely courageous woman who suffered from cerebral palsy. I experienced real compassion for this woman when she described the ordeal of being burgled. That could have been me. I could have caused all that pain, made this amazing woman cry like that. Suddenly the full weight of my sin and its consequences came crashing down on top of me. She became all my victims, all the people I have burgled, the guy that got pistol-whipped, his mother, his children. They all suddenly became real people and they all condemned me for all I had put them through. The Sycamore Tree course brought into vivid reality the impact of my crimes and my addiction, and it nearly broke me.

sam's story



"With that self-awareness came self-hatred and a realisation of the person I had become, and I knew I could not continue like that. The Sycamore Tree course showed me that I needed to think and act in new ways. The facilitators of Sycamore Tree are always in my prayers. I will never forget the people I met there as they have changed my life. Thank you."