

I Was in Prison...You Came to Me

2019 Time, Talent, Treasure

Matthew 25:31-40

Pastor Mark Kremer

We have been looking forward to this weekend and what we get to share with you this morning for a number of months now. So we are just so glad that the snow came yesterday morning and not this morning, but it is beautiful, isn't it? We have been presented with an opportunity as a church that is really such a remarkable opportunity that we want to share with you this morning. So our service is going to look a little different than our typical Sunday morning service.

This is an opportunity to minister to some of the most forsaken and forgotten and broken people in our society. This is a population of people made up of both men and women from ages thirteen to ninety. These individuals have inflicted incredible pain and suffering and brought trouble to many, many other people and to themselves. Many of them themselves, if not most, experience or have experienced some sort of abuse or neglect or have mental illness that plagues their lives. If you haven't picked up on whom I'm talking about yet, I'm talking about those who are incarcerated... prisoners. There are over five thousand men and women in our state correctional facilities, many more hundreds in prisons, county jails, and youth detention centers and, in the eyes of society, these people are seen as worthless. Many see them as beyond redemption, lost causes, not worth investing in—the ultimate outcasts of society. We lock them away, and the society says, “Put them in jail; lock them away; throw away the key. We don't want to have anything to do with them.” That's society's view of criminals. But in the eyes of God, now that's a whole different story. Wouldn't you agree with me this morning that the view that God has towards these people should be the view that you and I, as the redeemed people of God, should also have towards these individuals—the true outcasts of society? So, before we shine the spotlight on this ministry area, and before we tell you about the opportunity before us, I want us to just take a look at Matthew, Chapter 25, and see God's heart and the heart of His people for individuals like this.

If you have your Bibles, Matthew chapters 24 and 25 are called the *Olivet Discourse*. The last days of Jesus' life, He took His disciples out of the city at night and they went to the Mount of Olives. The disciples were asking Him questions about the final judgment and the kingdom of God they had anticipated—when Jesus would come as King—and what that would be like and when Jesus would take His throne and what was to come before that? And so there was a series of stories and parables and things that Jesus describes as some of the aspects of that, and that's what we are in the middle of here in verse 31 of chapter 25. We are reading verses 31-40, but let's just start here with verses 31-34 as a little introduction to the scene.

But when the Son of Man (*referring to Jesus the Messiah*) comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations (*all the peoples of the earth*) will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” (*NASB, Matthew 25:31-34)

So here's the scene: You and I will be there in this moment, right? And if we have put our faith in Christ, we are among those **who are blessed of the Father**, clearly an indication they too are righteous because of God's actions on their behalf, right? They have been made righteous by the blessing of God through the person of Jesus Christ. That's how they are righteous. You and I will be there; we will be part of this scene and this conversation someday. You may have a *deja vu* moment when you are standing and, "I think I've had this conversation before." So he's inviting them to enter into the kingdom; Jesus is on the throne, the end of the age. So He says to the righteous, beginning in verse 35:

"For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you have Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me." (Vs. 35-36)

Now let's just think about the various things that Jesus lists that His righteous ones had done and He says, "You did this to me; I was in these situations and you saw and ministered to me." So he says, "I was hungry and thirsty..." those are the core essentials just to be sustained in life, right? We can't live without food and water, and so there was a material need "...and you gave me sustenance; you gave me what I needed to survive. I was a stranger..." (that word means an outsider, one without a home; we think of the homeless person.) "...I was somebody who didn't have a place to belong and what did you do? You invited me in and gave me a place. I was naked," he says. Now nakedness in the Scripture, most of the time, has a direct correlation to shame. It goes all the way back to Genesis chapter 3 when Adam and Eve sinned and they discovered their nakedness. Then they hid in shame and Noah was uncovered and full of shame and so shame and nakedness go together. So let's read it that way: "I was full of shame and you covered me with dignity; you clothed me. I was sick and you came and suffered with me; you sat with me in my suffering. I didn't go it alone; you were there beside me in my suffering." Finally, "I was in prison; I was cast out; I was put away; I was locked behind bars and what did you do? You came to me; you came to be with me." That's remarkable! This description is of the righteous and the righteous having ministered to Jesus in this way and that's what really kind of takes the righteous back as you will see in verse 37:

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite you in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'" (Vs. 37-38)

They are kind of astounded that Jesus said they did these things, which is another clear indication that these are not individuals who were doing these actions in order to win God's favor, right? Because if you are doing something deliberately to impress someone else or to win their favor, you are very conscious and aware of what you are doing. This is such a natural outflow of the life of the righteous they are saying, "Lord, when did we ever do this and when did we ever see you, Jesus, in these conditions and minister to you? We have no recollection of ever running into Jesus and seeing Him in this way." Verse 40—this is key! This is what Jesus thinks.

"The King (King Jesus) will answer and say to them, 'Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even the least of them* (even the most lacking in dignity among them), you did it to Me.'"

What is astounding here is Jesus' identification—personal identification—with the broken, the forsaken, the suffering, the forgotten, and the outcast. So much so that Jesus said, "When you love,

when you serve, when you act on behalf of the least, you are loving Me, and that's what the righteous are noted for! We often times think of loving God and loving people (others) as two sort of separate things, don't we? We think of worship and prayer and, you know, loving God as sort of this activity—these sets of activities—we do, and then we go out and love other people. But Jesus said, “You love Me best; you worship Me best by loving the least.” To the extent that you see the needs of the least and that you care about their needs, right? You have to see the need before you can care about the need, so first you must have the eyes to even see these people, right? Do we ever drive by the prison on 14th street and actually see the people to the extent that You see them? And then do we care and then act on behalf of the least, the broken, the forsaken, as if you are ministering to Jesus Himself, as if you are loving Jesus? That's an astounding thing! This is what defines the righteous. It isn't what makes us righteous; it defines a mature, righteous person. A mature righteous person is on mission with Jesus, loving and serving the least...seeing, caring, and acting on behalf of the forsaken and the outcast. So the ultimate evidence of our righteousness, of our relationship with God, of our maturity, is not how frequently we show up at church, how many verses we have memorized, the piety of our own life, and our separation from evil in the world. No, the ultimate evidence of our right standing with God, having an understanding of God's grace is the extent we show mercy and kindness and serve sinners, misfits, and losers—people that are a lot like us. That's what Jesus is saying and so it's only natural that we as His church, as His people, would be all about seeing, caring, and acting on behalf of the outcast, the forsaken, those that society has written off, but that matter to God and should matter to us. Therefore we act and serve and love and share the love of Jesus with the prisoner.

There are hundreds of us in this room this morning that are involved in ministry to the least; we celebrate that that's the natural outflow of a redeemed life. Keep on doing it! But this morning we want to put a spotlight for just a little bit on the number of people—more than forty people—that actually, continually go and serve and minister to prisoners in the jail, the youth detention center, the State Penitentiary. These are people that regularly serve and go to the prisoner, follow the Jesus model to the person where he already is. One man in this church exemplifies and has modeled this commitment to go to the prisoner longer than any other person here, for more than forty years, and I want you to hear a bit of his own personal testimony regarding his ministry. This is Byron Anderson.

(Video): <https://www.lincolnberean.org/sermons/> (forward to 37:00)

We want to thank you again, Byron, for all that you've done. (applause) Byron is not alone. Like I said, there are more than forty individuals who regularly go to different facilities throughout our city. Would those of you here please stand up? (applause) Next Sunday, both hours, there will be an open house where you can learn more about the variety of ministries in the prisons that there are and how you can get involved—including the project that we are just going to announce now. So I would encourage you to stop by and ask questions and learn more about this population. Again, there are more than 5000 individuals that are incarcerated by the state, and in every year, almost 20% of those individuals are released back into the community. Eighty percent will be released in a matter of a few years, so what happens during incarceration and how their lives are changed there, makes all the difference in where they go after they're out...and whether they end up back there or on a different path in life. This is a vital ministry to them and to our society when the righteous step into it.

We became aware a few years ago that *Prison Fellowship* was coming into Nebraska, as they are in many other states. Prison Fellowship was started by Chuck Colson, who was incarcerated after the

Watergate affair; he became a believer in prison and started Prison Fellowship. They came to Nebraska—we were excited about that—and some of our people began to volunteer there. They had a program that began called the *Prison Fellowship Academy* which is a very special program that inmates can apply for and be a part of. They have their own living quarters; they also have their own programming—five days a week—that helps them prepare for life, get to know Jesus, work on marriage, anger, fathering, and all of those kinds of things. The program grew, but they didn't have a space at the prison for this kind of classroom work and small group work and instruction—only very limited space and, by the way, the state has very limited money for programming to help inmates. And so there's no money, no space, except that the prison said, "There's an old cannery building on the grounds." The cannery building was used back when the inmates grew vegetables and fruit and then canned those for their own eating, but then had been mostly abandoned in the last number of years. It sits on the grounds of the State Penitentiary. "We have no money, but if you can fix this building up, renovate it, you can use this as a ministry space—and also anyone else who wants to use this space for ministry can use it."

So, I called Chan Merry who was the one who headed up our *Habitat for Humanity* project that came out of our *Staying Alive* group. That group wanted to continue to be actively involved in projects in our community for others, so they called themselves the *Hope Builders*. I called them and Chan jumped all over this opportunity, and they have been working over the last couple of months with contractors, prison engineers and architects to design the space and figure out what's needed. And of course it's complicated while doing all this work behind the bars of the prison. It's hard just to get in there and get out of there, and so it's been quite a challenge but they've been up to it and excited about it. We are excited to share this project now and how we—all together—can be involved in this project. But before we give you anymore details, I want you to learn a little more about *Prison Fellowship Academy* and meet three of the inmates that are involved in this program right now.

(Video): <https://www.lincolnberean.org/sermons/> (forward to 47:00)

There will be an expanded version of James' story sent out in an all-church email this week. One of the things that we've been talking about—just this week that God is doing around the country—is that some of these people who have been in for a long time have come to faith, are growing in their faith, and are actually going to seminary within the prison walls and are becoming pastors and missionaries to the prison. I think that's the course that James is on. He may be there the rest of his life—in his mission field—serving Jesus. There are some states where this is so powerful and effective that they don't even need guards in some of the dorms. God could raise up an army of these people to minister with us behind the walls of the prison. That is just awesome.

(Video): <https://www.lincolnberean.org/sermons/> (forward to 57:30)

(Bryan Clark):

So there's a whole group of us who would say that we are honored, we are humbled—to be honest with you we are a bit stunned—at the opportunity that's been set before us. I just want to help us wrap our minds around this, this morning: The state of Nebraska and the penitentiary have invited us to help make it possible to create a facility behind the walls, in the heart of the prison, dedicated to the study of God's Word—to the reaching of these prisoners with the gospel and disciple them to become more like Jesus. The opportunity is just almost unbelievable! Last week from 2 Corinthians 9, we talked about when you sow generously, you reap generously. Sometimes it isn't about money

and stuff; sometimes the bountiful harvest is about bigger opportunities to again be more generous. We talked about that last week. We have thought about, as a church, to be generous to our community, and we really feel like this is just blessing that and granting us an almost unimaginable opportunity to be a part of something that impacts our state, our community, and those men in prison. I have a whole stack of letters from prisoners, and I've highlighted four of them. Here is their message to us as a congregation:

It's a real good feeling knowing that there are some really great Christians that care about our comfort and spiritual well-being enough to give unselfishly of their wealth. I'm very grateful to you all and my heart rejoices that God has given us, here in Prison Fellowship, a place to study because of your generosity. Thank you very much.

The generosity you have shown is so heartfelt. We appreciate all you have done. The conditions these men had to endure during their classes were unbearable at times. Nonetheless, the dedication and sacrifice would shine through the uncontrolled temperature in the building, the heat that filled the air in the summer, along with the audio and video technicalities, they would not keep these men away from learning and the need for the Word of Jesus Christ. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

I give thanks to my God because you are not ashamed to stand, putting your faith to work for the lost, rejected, and forgotten. I choose not to use words to show what your love gifts mean to me but I will show you all, if God is willing, that you may know your efforts were not a waste, I will become the man God desires me to be and help all whom I cross paths with, to do the same. Thank you and God bless you all.

I am writing to thank you so very much for having the interest and compassion to not give up on us as people and human beings. It is so wonderful to know that people care and are willing to help out people in our position and need. Along with my faith and trust in God, it is yet another treasuring gift you are blessing all of us with, and there is nothing but gratitude and love to convey to you one and all. This program is a start for us to begin or continue the changes and transformation to being better men, fathers, and husbands; and to contribute to society. In a time when it would be easy to give up on my situation, as so many have written me off as a lost cause, having a program and place to work and study the Word of God and be around positive, like-minded men is a true blessing in my life. Thank you, thank you, thank you. May God bless each and every one of you and your families.

When we set out to do the *Habitat for Humanity* several years ago, Habitat had a notebook with fundraising ideas, a fundraising committee, and all these ways to raise the money. And in those discussions I said to the habitat people, "That won't be necessary." And they said, "Well, yes, you'll have to do it this way; this is how it's done." But I insisted, "That won't be necessary. All I have to do is to present the need to the people. They are a very generous people and they will meet the need." Habitat was blown away by the fact that all we did was ask, and in a few short weeks the money was in. It was a wonderful experience for us as a congregation. Out of that came the *Hope Builders* and Chan Merry has been leading that, partnering up with Boyd Batterman. There are a lot of people who have already done a lot of work: engineers, architects, contractors—donating time,

donating skills, donating materials. There are a lot of people involved in this. Our part—together then as a congregation—is to raise the necessary funds. What’s needed for the project is \$80,000. Now that’s actually less than we needed for the Habitat House. You’re talking about a facility that will be provided for these men to learn and study the Word of God for years and years and years to come, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of prisoners. So it’s an amazing opportunity to invest in the lives of so many men.

Our mission statement says: *To glorify God by seeking to present every person complete in Christ.* Who would have possibly guessed when we penned those words, that that would include a ministry centered behind the walls of the penitentiary—seeking to present *those men* complete in Christ. It’s just an extraordinary opportunity. The goal is \$80,000 and we’d like to have it by March 1st. There’s a sense of urgency here—there’s a window here—and we want to get moving on this. So, the fund is *Hope Builder’s*. If you turn in a check or envelope, just put *Hope Builders* on it. If you go to the website: go to the giving tab; there’s a drop down menu; you’ll see Hope Builders and it’s very easy.

Now I do think it’s interesting that for the first time in many years, our year-end giving came up \$129,000 short. I also think it’s interesting that on the weekend we are presenting this, there is a snowstorm. Can you feel the warfare in this? I suppose if we were going to be controlled by our fears, we would probably say, “Better hunker down until we get that figured out.” But as you well know, we don’t operate on the basis of fear, but on the basis of faith.

We feel like God has called us to this. We are committed to this, and we are very excited to see God provide the necessary funds for the Prison Project...and to get the budget situation straightened out. So here it is. What do you say???? Why don’t you join us together for the glory of God...and let’s make this thing happen!!

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