

MARCH 15, 2001
“Zero Tolerance”

Perhaps one of the biggest tragedies I see happening today with the prison system is the number of young people coming into the system with long sentences. We are living in an age of “zero tolerance.” It is obvious to me that it has become politically correct to show as little mercy to criminals as possible—sometimes no mercy at all! But when a young man aged fourteen to eighteen comes to prison with a sentence of twenty to sixty years or more, with virtually no hope for an early release, his life is basically over. Unless something radical happens to give him hope and a reason to remain positive, over time he will most likely settle into a state of despondency and hopelessness. In addition he will probably be forced into joining a violent prison gang. If he does so it will probably be for one or more of the following reasons: fear and protection; peer pressure; a need for companionship; a need to belong to a group to replace the missing family unit; a need to have a higher status in the prison’s hierarchy, for even in prison no one wants to be thought of as an outcast.

All these reasons are nothing more than forms of duress, but he joins nonetheless, for to be alone is to be unprotected. To have no gang affiliation is to increase the potential of being victimized. No one wants to spend years being bullied and pushed around, raped, robbed, or tormented. So eventually the young man joins a gang. He takes his vows and does his acts of violence, including assaulting other prisoners and even the staff, in order to “make rank” and impress the gang’s leader. Furthermore, he will be doomed to spend what was supposed to be the most productive period of his life living in a cell. He will work tirelessly and fight constantly to keep his reputation, and he will most likely live a life of rebellion, anger, and complete defiance to all authority.

These things will be this young man’s unhappy lot in prison. With such a lengthy prison sentence, there is literally no escape. He will be locked in a vicious cycle with no way out and no end in sight. I am not saying all this to sound negative, but from what I have seen over the years, this is pretty much how it will be. Over time even his family, if he has one, may forget about him as they go on with their lives. The letters and visits, if he ever got any, begin to diminish. As the years pass this young man may become just another forgotten soul buried behind the walls and wires.

This is why it is so important to have active and well established Christian programs and people-loving ministries coming into the prisons, juvenile detention centers, and training schools, for it is in these seemingly hopeless and depressing situations that God can do His greatest works. I hope the gospel is still the “good news” no matter where it is being shared, and that Jesus is still able to heal the brokenhearted and set at liberty those who are being held captive by the power of sin and the crushing oppressiveness of this world’s system. A young person who gets introduced to Jesus Christ and then begins to have a personal relationship with Him can receive a level of hope and peace, as well as a sense of purpose, that gangs and crime cannot give, whether that young person is in prison or not.

Of course, there is also the need for these young people coming into the prison system to get an education. It is imperative to teach them how to read and write better, as many of them have already dropped out of school altogether. But this is for the professionals and experts to figure out. As for me, my prayer is that prison and youth-centered ministries will continue to be welcomed into these facilities, and that these ministries still flourish. One thing the Bible has taught me is the unfathomable worth of every human soul. While the effects of the violent

crimes a young man commits can never be reversed nor can the damage be undone, God can still come and work a miracle. He can save that prisoner's soul and change his heart. While many in society trumpet "zero tolerance" on crime at all cost, and while severe punishment is sometimes deserved, Jesus Christ still wishes to impart mercy. He has a plan to bring redemption and salvation to our castaway youth, and that plan includes active prison ministries comprised primarily of lay people. These ministries need as much prayer, support, and encouragement as possible, for their labor of love is never in vain.