

Letter to the Loyal

Week 3

Week Three: Philippians 1:12-14

“I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.”

Philippians 1:12-14 (NRSV)

In this resource page, we are taking a look quickly at Roman imprisonment and then a look at us today. In theory, the Romans only used prisons for before your trial and before your execution if you were found guilty of a crime punishable by death. The most severe prisons were when you were in military custody, like Paul above. In this case, you would be chained to a guard. Sometimes you would be in a subterranean cell. Less severe prison situations could be where you are placed in the custody of someone widely respected. The least severe way of awaiting trial would be to be released on your own word. The difference in these situations can sometimes be by the crime, but most often it is by your standing within Rome (for an example, read through Acts 16:35-40). Poor people and noncitizens were treated harsher. They were seen as less important than Roman citizens. All of this is the ideal of what Rome wanted though it is reported that “while Roman criminal law did not formally recognize imprisonment as a punishment for free persons, delays in trial, sentence and execution effectively turned imprisonment into a punishment (Rapske 1994, 10-20).

At times we like to think that we have improved as humankind over the years. We like to think that as we improve technology, we are also more humane towards one another. Particularly, our nation has an arrogance about ourselves in who we are in the world and in time. One of the most humbling and frankly humiliating parts of our society is our use of the prison system. Mass incarceration is an industry, and has been as long as we have been a nation. Here are a few quotes from Dominique Gilliard’s book *Rethinking Incarceration*

On Mass Incarceration

“Mass incarceration is and always has been inextricably connected to race and class. Poor people, people of color, and particularly poor people of color have served as cannon fodder for an exploitative system since before the abolition of slavery” (29). The percentages of people incarcerated who are black or brown compared to the general population in the United States are staggering. Our governments choices on how they prosecute drug offenses follow racial stereotypes. This is a problem we need to attend to.



Convict Leasing

Convict leasing is the process where industries “lease” convicts to do work for them. Where in slavery someone was viewed as property and it served the “owner” to keep them alive, in convict leasing there is no incentive to not overwork someone. If something happens to that individual, another one replaces them. If we are wondering the scale of this, look at this statistic:

“In 1898, convict leasing supplied 73 percent of Alabama’s entire annual state revenue” (38). This means that nearly seventy five cents out of every dollar that the state brought in from taxes, fines, and all other income streams came from the leasing of convicts.

Prison Labor

This is not just a thing of the past. The same type of exploitation is done today. Texas Correctional Industries “employs more than five thousand prisoners at thirty-seven factories, and its sales garnered almost ninety million dollars in 2014. Most of TCI’s laborers are not paid” (43).

Private Prisons

The prison industry does not only include labor. We have private prisons as well. As these are businesses, they enter into contracts with the government to ensure an income.

“Quotas dictate the number of prisoners who must occupy beds in these facilities nightly, and the quotas range from requiring a minimum of 70 percent to one hundred percent occupancy” (62).

This means that the number of people in the prisons is not dictated as much by the number of people offending the laws, but that the number of beds determines how people are told to enforce the laws. The prisons contractually need to be filled.

Reflection

What Can We Do?

1. Use your prayers.

Let’s be in prayer that God will convict us that this is not the way to treat one another. Let’s pray for courage and conviction to bring about the changes needed.

2. Use your senses.

Jesus said that when we visit the imprisoned we are visiting him. If not visiting prisons, lets listen to those who are impacted by mass incarceration. Let’s feel their stories and see their struggle.

3. Use your dollars.

Many people who have investments are in one way or another investing in companies that have to do with private prisons. If you are investing, continue to be wise and do not invest in these businesses. There are plenty of other industries to invest in.

4. Use your vote.

Every election there are ways to vote that impact mass incarceration in this country. Let's be a people who do our homework and follow our convictions.

5. Use your voice.

Advocate for your sisters and brothers. Tell stories of the people who we love who are impacted by mass incarceration.

Further Resources

If you are wanting further resources, here are a few:

Books:

[Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating for Justice That Restores](#)

[The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness](#)

Website:

[Equal Justice Initiative](#)

Also, some of us have talked about making a trip to Montgomery to visit the Museum and Memorial. Contact Matt at Matt@becomingone.church if you are interested in participating in this trip.

Resources Used Above

D. Gilliard, *Rethinking Incarceration: Advocating Justice that Restores*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2018)

B. Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, (BAFCS 3; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994)