

A Heart of Mercy

This week, we are starting a 2 or 3-part series called Second Chances. The reason I say that it's a 2 or 3-part series is that the third week—April 22nd—won't be a message, but we'll be taking part in the Second Chances 5k. The 5k is through Prison Fellowship which is an organization that we're just starting to partner with.

You might not know this, but Congress—in a bi-partisan vote—has declared the month of April to be Second Chance Month. Even President Trump agreed with this and declared it national Second Chance Month. Here's why this is important.

Every society must be governed by laws. It would be great if everyone was always, kind and upright and honest, but we know that because of our sinful nature, that doesn't always happen. So, we need a justice system and we even need jails and prisons. The purpose is that we value *justice*.

Now, we'll talk more in-depth about justice next week, but *justice basically means that as much as it's up to us everyone plays on a level field*. We recognize that every human regardless of their race, sex, ability or “whatever” is made in the image of God and that everyone has a chance to flourish. But that doesn't always happen.

Throughout history, humans have had a tendency to devalue people because of their race, because of their sex (women have mostly paid that price), class, or even

because of their behavior. It's easy to label people as "other" and "othering" people makes it easy to treat them as less than a human made in the image of God. That's a picture of injustice. In our society, when someone does something unjust and they're caught, they have to pay the price—it might be a fine, it might be restitution, community service, or they might even spend some time in prison.

Here's what this has to do with Second Chance month. April was deemed Second Chance month to bring awareness to the fact that our justice system and our society is not always just. In fact, there are ways in which, in the name of justice, our justice system often creates more *injustice*. Let me give you some examples.

The United States incarcerates more of its citizens than any other nation in the world. In 1972, there were 200,000 people in prison. Today, there are 2.2 million people behind bars. 65 million Americans have been incarcerated at one time in their lives. The U.S. has 5% of the world's population, but 25% of its prisoners.

Maybe just as troubling is that there's a racial disparity in our justice system. For instance, blacks represent 12% of the US population, but 33% of the prison population. 1 in 3 black males in the US can expect to spend some time in prison in their lifetime. A person is 11 times more likely to get the death penalty if the victim is *white* than if the *victim* is black and 22 times more likely to get the death penalty if the *defendant* is black.

Now, you might say, well, the reason there are more black people in prison is because they commit more crime—especially violent crimes. That’s true enough. And I do believe that people need to take personal responsibility. But unless you’re willing to say that black people are inherently more sinful than other people then there has to be societal factors influencing it. That’s not a black problem, it’s an American problem.

When you do the research, there are a couple of factors that seem to be at play. The first is the War on Drugs that was first declared by president Nixon that disproportionately impacted blacks over whites. [incarceration chart] Here’s a chart from the Pew Research center that shows the percentage of the male population that was incarcerated from 1960 to 2010. Black men are represented by the two purple lines, white men by the two green lines. The darker shades are those without a high school diploma and the lighter shades are those with a diploma.

The sharpest increases happen among black men between the ages of 30-34 without a high school diploma. Their incarceration rate went from about 7% in 1980 to more than 32% in 2000—an increase of about 450%. There are similar increases across the board. At the same time, uneducated white men in the same age range only increased from 2% to 5%. This is despite the fact that the rates of drug use among whites and blacks is virtually identical. So, you see the racial disparity there.

But even more than race, the greatest determining factors in incarceration is not race, it's education and poverty. While blacks are more likely to be incarcerated than whites, poor people are FAR more likely to be incarcerated than wealthy people. Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative says that our justice system is far more favorable for the rich and guilty than poor and innocent. Now, race and economics converge because, much of the racial gap in incarceration rates can be explained by the fact that blacks in America are far more likely to be poor than whites. Some of this has to do with the fact that generational wealth is much harder to come by for blacks since through redlining, they've historically been denied home-ownership. But it's also partly because 1/3 of their men in their prime earning years are sitting in prison.

Which brings us to the focus of Second Chance Month. Most people who spend time in prison get released to what is often called the "second prison." By some estimates, there are as many as 48,000 laws that adversely affect someone with a criminal record. For instance, a convicted felon permanently loses his right to vote. So, that's how we get statistics like, 34% of black men in the state of Alabama have permanently lost their right to vote. Because of laws or societal barriers, it might be next to impossible for a convicted felon to get a good job, secure housing, be admitted to college or even volunteer in the community. Is it any wonder that 67.8% of people who

were in prison will be re-arrested in the next three years? Not only that, but think about how many spouses and families that leaves without a husband, wife, father or mother.

Prison Fellowship works for prison reform, fair sentencing and help with reentry. The goal of Second Chance month, specifically, is to bring awareness to the barriers to reentry that plague so many who have already paid their debt to society. As a church, when we decided—and, remember we decided this together—we wanted to involve ourselves in this effort. So, that’s what we’re doing.

Now, I know there are probably some of you who are asking why in the world we’re talking about this in church. Aren’t we supposed to be talking about spiritual stuff like prayer and faith and salvation? Of course, we are—and we do. But if we want to be faithful to the whole scope of Scripture, we cannot focus on the “spiritual stuff” and ignore the very clear commands we have in Scripture to work for justice and mercy in our world. Mercy and justice are Biblical issues. Let me give you a little sample.

Proverbs 31:8-9 says, **“Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy.”** Jeremiah 22:3, **“This is what the LORD says, ‘Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.’”**

In the office this week, we were talking about the potential dangers of organized religion and one of them is summed up in Isaiah, chapter 1. This is God speaking to Israel and challenging them because they've developed the attitude that as long as they come to the sanctuary and do their proscribed worship, God is pleased with them. **"¹³Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies. ¹⁴Your New Moon feasts and your appointed festivals I hate with all my being. They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵When you spread out your hands in prayer, I hide my eyes from you; even when you offer many prayers, I am not listening. Your hands are full of blood!"**

The danger is that being religious can lull us into thinking we're righteous people, but God says it doesn't work that way. Here's the solution he gives. **"¹⁶Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight; stop doing wrong. ¹⁷Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow."** (Isaiah 1:16-17) But we see it in New Testament as well.

In Matthew 25 Jesus teaches about the judgment. And he doesn't say that judgment is based on how well you follow your religious duty. He says this, **"³⁴The King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was**

hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” Do you see why we’re talking about this? Mercy and justice are Biblical issues.

Now if you’re like me and you tend to have a little more conservative bent, it can be a hard thing to hear. Conservatives like to be known as tough on sin and tough on crime. But the question is not whether sin or crime are serious issues. They certainly are. The question is the right response to sinners. With that in mind, let’s take a look at Romans, chapter 2 that might help us rethink that. First, a little background.

In the passage that immediately precedes this one, Paul focuses on the wrath of God toward sin and he talks about people as “them.” In other words, THEY committed sexual immorality, THEY are full of envy, slander, greed, murder, strife, and gossip. THEY hate God, they disobey their parents and THEY are deserving of death.

Now, if you’re a Christian reading this, it might whip you up into a lather. “Yeah! They deserve wrath! They deserve punishment!” and then you would form a mob with torches and pitch-forks and go after them. That’s the reaction Paul is trying to incite—revealing their inner attitude. But in chapter 2, we find that he was just setting up a rhetorical trap. Here’s what he writes...

“¹You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ²Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³So when you, a mere human being, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? ⁴Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”

One of the core truths we learn from the gospel story is that we are *all* sinners. That’s what Paul is pointing out here. We know that God’s judgment is right and deserved. But God’s judgment isn’t just reserved for “them.” We are all sinners.

So, Paul points that out and says that sin deserves judgment. But we all have the tendency to excuse ourselves and believe that “they” are the ones who really deserve judgement. But Paul goes right for the heart in verse 4. Will you show a little humility? **“⁴Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?”**

For many people this is counter-intuitive. *It’s God’s kindness that leads to repentance.* We have a tendency to believe that it’s the threat of judgment that leads to repentance. But more often, *judgment often leads to a change of behavior, but mercy leads to a change of heart.*

Now that doesn't mean that if someone commits murder, we should just say, "Oh, no big deal! Let's just give you mercy." That doesn't take into account the seriousness of sin and injustice. Justice demands some kind of punishment or reparation and if the person is likely to reoffend, we need to keep people safe. Often, incarceration is necessary, and it can sometimes lead to good. Many people have found God in a jail cell. But people don't give up their humanity when they offend. But too often, seeking rehabilitation is hard, so we settle for punishment.

Ann and I have tried very hard not to put pressure on our kids because they're pastor's kids, because we know that trying to be perfect can be a huge burden. We also hope they won't hide things from us because they're afraid of how we'll respond. I've mentioned before that moving here 8 years ago was hard for the kids—especially Ellie. In fact, when we watched the movie "Inside Out," we thought it was about Ellie. All of that struggle led us to a crisis moment a few years ago. I asked Ellie if she would be willing to share and that made her really nervous, but she said I could share.

Ellie had a hard time in middle school. She had left the only life she'd known and started to struggle with depression and anxiety. She would get home from school and go straight down to her room and read all night. Obviously, we were concerned, but we didn't know what to do other than take her to a counselor, but she didn't really think that was even working.

I don't remember what I was doing that night, but I came home and my wife told me that Ellie had confessed to her that she had been using marijuana. She had a friend at school who used it and she tried it, thinking it would help with her anxiety. At the same time she felt guilty about it. Eventually, she confided in our youth pastor who told her she should tell us—which was good advice.

Naturally, she was afraid of how we would react, but she was less afraid of how *Ann* would react, so she didn't tell me. She told Ann and wanted Ann to tell me. As a parent, it's hard to know what to do in those situations, but I was convinced that condemnation would only drive a wedge between us. So, I walked into her room and gave her a hug, told her I loved her (and apparently asked her if she wanted to go on a bike ride in the morning.) You can imagine she was quite relieved.

Well, I'd love to be able to tell you that she stopped instantly, but she didn't. Since she didn't get grounded for life and because she thought it would help her anxiety, she kept doing it...until we found out again. Well, Ann found out. This time we went in together and confronted her.

Now, we could have gone in and played the condemnation card. "We gave you grace and you took it for granted. *Now you're in trouble.*" But our goal wasn't to punish her for making fools of us, it was her own well-being. So rather than going in with a one-track mind of punishment, we went in with a heart of mercy. We got to the truth and

we responded the second time the *same* way we did the first time. We asked her if the path she was on would lead her to where she wanted to go. We hugged her. We assured her we loved her and we prayed with her. And that was a big turning-point for Ellie.

Now, I don't tell that story to tell you what great parents we are. I wish I could say I always handle every situation that way, but I can assure you that I don't. But I tell that story as a real-life illustration of what Paul wrote. It's God's kindness that leads to repentance. God is merciful. And if God is merciful, then we are called to mercy too.

Now, I'm not saying that if someone robs a liquor store, we should send the police there to hug them. It's not going to work that way. But finding solutions to unjust incarceration has to start by rejecting the attitude that dehumanizes prisoners because, as Bryan Stevenson says, "We are all more than the worst thing we've ever done." These are people made in the image of God. And as much as we can, our goal cannot simply be to punish or get people out of our hair.

I'm pretty certain there will always be crime this side of heaven, but rather than focusing on punishment, we should work to find better ways to rehabilitate and even moreso, as much as we can, try to reduce factors like poverty, dropping out of school, and broken families that lead to incarceration; to reduce the barriers to re-entering society after serving time and treating prisoners and felons as what they really are—people made in the image of God.

The issues are complicated and I'm sure there is no simple solution, but I'm also sure that nothing will get better until we develop a bent toward *mercy*. Mercy doesn't necessarily mean that there should be no prisons or people don't need to pay the price for crime. But it does mean that we recognize that a person doesn't cease to be a human made in the image of God when they commit a crime. They have dignity, value and worth. Not every prisoner will be reformed, but we can do better. And it starts with the church, who should be first ones to recognize the dignity and value of every person.