

## **Biblical Reflection: Prisons**

*Excerpted from the Washington Office [Prison Industrial Complex Guide](#).*

What is the ultimate purpose of imprisonment? Of punishment? We are people of faith who struggle to be free from the imprisonment of violence and sin and the harm they entail. We wish to bless others with the same freedom. Even within ourselves, we try to refrain from violence and exercise creative responses. Within our community there is a commitment to work for restorative justice-- to establish right and healthy relationships for all.

The inception of America's first penitentiary--the name conveying personal transformation--has religious roots. Quakers in 1790 established the Walnut Street jail in Philadelphia as an alternative to cruel and brutal punishment. It was hoped that solitary confinement would lead to self-correction. Elements associated with the modern prison or criminal justice system--vengeance, retribution/retaliation, hard punishment, efficiency and profit--do not jibe with remorse, rehabilitation, repair/restoration, healing, transformation, forgiveness, reconciliation, love and peace. What encompasses modern prisons fits neither initial good intentions nor the biblical vision of justice.

### **Old Testament Themes: *When crime occurs, what is God's vision of peace?***

*"Although God created a peaceable world, humanity chose the way of unrighteousness and violence. The spirit of revenge increased, and violence multiplied, yet the original vision of peace and justice did not die" ([Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective](#), Article 22).*

In the Old Testament, there are stern penalties for wrongdoing, but there is a firm pursuit of peace in the actions and instructions of God. Shalom, "peace," is a base word for this interpretation. It is a robust concept, as restorative justice scholar Howard Zehr and others point out, conveying a sense of "all rightness"--involving "material or physical conditions or circumstances... social relationships... and the moral or ethical realm." Zehr writes, "[It] should be no surprise that the words for paying back (shillum) and for recompense (shillem) have the same root word as shalom."

The Old Testament contains stern judicial actions, yet it cannot be employed as a tough-on-crime handbook. When wrongdoings occur, considerations of circumstances and limitations on retaliation illuminate God's use of community actions and response to secure fair treatment and due process. In short, we find no direct support or description matching the present nature and management of incarceration.

Can our criminal justice system seek justice and mercy for all involved in it? We seek to heed Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance... but love your neighbor as yourself."

### **New Testament Themes: *What does Jesus ask us to do regarding prisons and prisoners?***

*For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and visited me ([Matthew 25:35-36](#)).*

Jesus proclaims liberty to those who are in captivity and oppression (Luke 4:18). He experienced the full gamut of injustice from a "faulty" criminal justice system--false

imprisonment, wrongful interrogation and judgement and even the death penalty. Ironically, his circumstances lead to the pardon of the murderer Barabbas.

Jesus asks us to love [even] our enemies as we would love ourselves (Luke 6:27,31).

We should deeply acknowledge that violent crime does great harm to individuals and community. Love, forgiveness and repair do not easily follow. Governing authorities do have a role in responding to wrongdoing (Romans 13, 1 Peter 2:13-14). Anabaptists have traditionally viewed this responsibility within the notions of fairness and human decency, understanding that the duties of authorities are part of God's concern for order and safety.

It is often necessary to separate someone from others in order to protect persons from further violence. However, this is not a reason to: deny adequate diet, inflict poor living conditions, ignore prisoners' health, foster racial disparities and discrimination, expose youth to hardened criminals, cause suffering for prisoners' families (for example, charge families exorbitant fees for phone calls), subject prisoners to profit-making labor reflecting unfair wages, deny due legal process, further extend extralegal penalties after time served, block opportunities for spiritual and personal transformation, or impose isolation and maltreatment causing grave social alienation and psychological trauma. All of these things are at issue regarding the present criminal justice and prison systems.

Often these abuses come as a result of our own projected fears, lack of accountability, and desires for quick solutions. They are correlated to our society's desire to scapegoat or even sacrifice others; this is sometime applied to victims or offenders.

We must continue to pursue loving, creative actions which magnify overcoming evil with good (Romans 12:21).