

Do Not Forget Them

by

Rocky Fleming

“Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” Hebrews 13:3 (ESV)

Last week Greg Huett and I went to some *Journey Group* meetings that are held in two of Arkansas’ toughest prisons. The groups are inmate led, and are the result of the last two years of moving men toward an intimate, abiding relationship with Christ as they went through a *Journey Group*. This strategy describes Influencers’ objective for making disciples of Christ. We simply get them near to Christ and into close proximity with Him and He transforms their lives. Like what we have seen across this nation, in other nations, in other prisons, in offices, in churches and on campuses, we saw with those incarcerated men last week. We saw transformation. Note I didn’t say “rehabilitation” but rather “transformation.” When rehabilitation occurs we see only a recovery of sorts. But when transformation occurs, we see a new life emerge, and with that new life we see organic growth of the gospel and discipleship as this life expresses itself. Why is this? It is because coming to Jesus and living in the relationship that has been granted to us with God is the entire gospel, and the entire gospel when it is fully delivered and is fully caught, completely changes a person. It transforms them. What are some examples?

I grew up in the South. We know about the prisons here. They have a reputation for having some of the worst characters living in them. There is no prison more notorious than a prison in the South. The ones we visited last week are about as deep in the South as one could get. There are former gang-bangers and skinheads, and all points in between. There are some of the bawdiest looking men I have ever seen, with vile tattoos running all over their bodies. There were some bad dudes that made me shiver just standing beside them. Did I mention these men are in our *Journey Groups*? The man who is overseeing the *Journey Groups* in one of the prisons, and is dedicating his life in serving the inmates there is not a chaplain. Rather he is an inmate who is serving two consecutive life sentences. He is a black man, and a former gang-banger who was imprisoned there when he was 16 years old. He has been there 20 years. If you were to meet this man, you would understand the amazing work the Holy Spirit can do with His redemption of a man. This man has been redeemed, discipled and unleashed to impact his world around him. He has been transformed and it shows. I watched this man lead 50 men through our commencement ceremony and also watched him wash the feet of men who were former white and black gang members. I saw white men hovering over black men and black men hovering over white men, as they prayed for them when they had their feet washed. I saw mixed groups being jointly led by white and black men, and I saw no divisions or the complications of racial walls. I saw the Church being the Church that Jesus had in mind, and it was in those prisons. I saw repentance, reconciliation, brokenness and a faith so pure that it made me long for more of it myself. I heard this young 36 year old leader speak of the *Journey Group* men in his prison as “Community” and I understood why we were told to not forget those who are in prisons, for their world has been reduced to a few small acres of land behind electrified razor fence. They feel forgotten, and should not be. I tell you this. I have seen some very good *Journey Group* leaders and visionaries in the last 13 years of this ministry’s

existence, but I have seen no one better at leading or inspiring a group of men than the leaders I saw last week.

Next door to this prison is another one that they send the real bad guys to. It has the reputation of being the worst of the worst. The Chaplain and Warden of this other prison had heard amazing stories about the men who went through *The Journey* in the other prison. These transformed lives were being seen and heard. They wanted to start a new group, but didn't have an experienced leader to lead a new group and they felt he was needed. To fill this gap, another "lifer" volunteered to leave the better prison to go to the other one to start a new group. I watched this man lead his group, and again I saw as good a leadership as I have seen on the outside.

This new group at the other prison was really an interesting group, for like the others who are led by a black and white man, these men leading were about as opposite as they come. I kid you not, these two worked in tandem as well as any co-leaders I've seen. But the white guy would have been a great casting for "O Brother Where Art Thou?" and the black man in his younger days could have been an actor in "Boyz N the Hood." You would have had to see the movies to understand the comparison. But the bottom line is that these would be natural enemies on the outside and without Christ. But with Him and because of Him, I saw love and respect for each other. I saw the participants who were equally mixed in race, showing the same love and respect for each other. What I saw was a stark contrast to the way it normally is within a prison and its inmates, and at the heart of it was transformed lives by Christ.

These inmate visionaries have a desire that all men in those prisons go through *The Journey*. Their plan is to do it one inmate at a time, and to get those guys then helping to reach others. As this "community" grows, it will take on a life of its own, and this Church will impact the area where it is planted with men God has raised up. We have agreed to help supply the entire curriculum needs they will require to reach those men. We have assured them that we will support their efforts, and will join them when needed. But the fact is, I think the only thing they need at this time is our prayer and the curriculum.

Would you join with us in praying for our brothers in Cummins, Varner, Wrightsville, and Chino. These are prisons that we have brothers who are both serving and leading men toward Christ. Pray that God's work will continue to unfold and grow. Pray that we will sense the heart of Christ for the prisoners, and give to them the hope of Christ.

When I watched those men go through their commencement, I saw something on their faces and in their eyes that told me that *hope* has been restored to these men. I believe they sincerely feel that God loves them. I know this doesn't seem like a lot to most of you who read this, for we kinda grew up knowing God loves us. But for hardened men like I saw in those prisons, feeling loved is a foreign thing to them, and to feel loved by God is breathtaking. It is the best medicine they could ever be given. It restored hope to them ... a hope that their life was no longer to be lived without meaning or purpose. They have a new hope that their life could be turned around and made into something special for God's work. I saw it. They are special ...and I will carry them in my heart and prayers. They blessed my life and I will return the blessing by not forgetting them. Will you do the same?