

When prison ministry meets the promises of Scripture.

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. (Isa 55:11)

I went to a prison some time ago. I would normally see as many as 10 people, but I saw only one. The reasons why are too complicated to explain, they are basically because whatever can happen in prison eventually will. I suppose Murphy was a minister in prisons.

Because they had another function that the chapel was being used for, I was moved to another place. Often times when they use the chapel for another function that is not religious, they don't let the religious volunteers come in at all. Using the chapel for a religious purpose is the lowest priority. I was allowed to come in, and brought to another location. Only one person was able to come, about 20 minutes later than usual.

It makes it very difficult to serve Divine Liturgy when it's possible that I not see anybody for an hour. It makes it very difficult to have any cohesiveness in teaching or even just a personal relationship when I see someone one week and then I don't see them for a month or more because they can't get out of their living quarters, or because the prison tells me I'm not able to come for some reason or another.

Supposedly prisoners have certain rights that have been granted them by the state of Texas. They have a right to practice their religion. When they're given a so-called lay-in (the piece of paper that lists a location that they are allowed to be at and the time they are allowed to be there and the reason), it gives them a right to go to the place that they are laid in for. They might have a lay-in for medical or for the commissary, or for the chapel. When a lay-in is for the chapel, some guards don't care at all and even when they are told to call out those who are laid in, they don't do it.

A prisoner may be able to go to a guard if he is decent bloke, and show him his lay-in and ask permission to leave. The guard, if he is doing his job, will give permission. If the guard is not doing his job, he can refuse permission, and give no reason whatsoever. Sometimes the guard is called and told to "call out" chapel service. The guard can choose to do this or not do it. There are very few repercussions that I can see when a guard chooses to not do his job, and not call out the chapel. Of course, he must do that when somebody has a medical lay-in or education lay-in, but chapel is not a priority.

So basically, whether prison rules are followed or not is completely dependent on who is the one who supposed to follow them. This is the way of life in prison. There are good guards who care about the prisoners that they oversee, and do their jobs and there are others that don't. I've come to a prison before when I really needed to see someone, and asked the officer to call them out several times,

and every time the correctional officer says they were called out, but all that means is that they either did or didn't call on the phone to the place of that prisoner was, and the person answering the phone either did or didn't do anything about it. This is the way of life of prison ministry.

The man I did see is the very dear to me. I've known him for a long time, and he has come to the point where he wishes to become an Orthodox Christian. I've seen great changes in him over the years, at first very subtle changes, but now changes that are increasing. He will thrive if I can see him at least twice a month.

There's another one is very serious about this, but is not as well schooled in the ways of dealing with the vagaries of prison guards, and he doesn't find a way to get out of his living space and get down to the chapel. You have to have a certain chutzpah sometimes to get out. Perhaps education will be called, and education is a big priority, and guards pretty much don't dare refuse to allow people to leave for it. And when education is called, a smart convict will get in the line with everybody and go out, and then peel off and go to the chapel. He has a lay-in, so he won't be out of place. The problem is getting out in the first place.

I was very demoralized because I heard about the suicide of a man only a little while before I came. He was known to the man that I was talking to. He had a family difficulty, and had not been able to contact his family because he was "on chain". That means literally that he was chained up, and went somewhere for some purpose, probably medical. He cannot communicate with anyone when he is gone from the prison. He hears no news whatsoever when he is gone from the prison. When he arrived back at the prison and heard about a family emergency, he called and his family was very angry at him for not responding earlier. This is a physical impossibility for prisoner goes out on chain. This man was extremely depressed, and within a few days climbed on top of railing and threw himself off headfirst into the concrete below. What is in the mind of a man when he is standing over a precipice contemplating diving in such a way it is head would hurt first so that he would be sure that he would killed? I know his name, but I did not know him. I don't understand why people feel such pain. I don't understand what drives people to kill themselves.

I will add him to +Daniel's list (since my son +Daniel died suddenly almost 2 years ago, in a swimming accident, I pray for people who died suddenly. I expanded this to people who died suddenly and committed suicide, and now I think I have at least 30 suicides that I pray for by name every day).

Sometimes so many bad things happen in prison and everywhere else, that I have my doubts, and I wonder what does it matter that I'm going to pray for a person I did not know, who killed himself, almost unknown to the world. Those are devilish thoughts. The fact that I have them is bad, but I'm not going to give into them.

The primary thing we have in the world is prayer. This is our way of influencing the world, more than our actions. Our actions must be coupled to our prayer. There must be prayer first, and during, and

after our actions. This is not easy. I preach it to everybody that will listen, and probably to some don't want to hear it, because it's the only thing that works. But it is not easy.

Perhaps you have devilish thoughts. Perhaps you have doubts, you feel demoralized, you wonder if what you're doing has any positive effect at all. I only know one thing to do about these devilish thoughts. I will pray anyway.

So, I will pray for this man for the rest of my life, begging God too have mercy upon him. I know that the day he committed suicide, probably thousands of people committed suicide, and I don't know their names. But I know the name of this man. Besides, in my daily prayers, I pray for all suicides. Why do I do this? Because I hate evil things. Suicide is extremely evil. It makes Satan laugh, and he is evil. I have no idea exactly what my poor prayer for a person I do not know who committed suicide does. I suspect that if God told me the truth about my prayer, it would do me no good, because of my passions and sins. So, I pray, knowing that I only pray because God is love and I am trying to love, and I hate evil. I hate the kind of sadness and depression and despondency that drives a man to dive headfirst from a balcony.

I know someone else in prison who has not committed suicide of the body, but is basically committing suicide of the soul. I baptized him, and he has now immersed himself in convict culture. One premise of convict culture is that whatever you gotta do to "survive" you do. Another premise of convict culture is that if you get a little pleasure somewhere, get it. So, he is immersed in unclean things, and is not coming around anymore. Of course, I cannot give communion to someone who is immersed in unclean things, but I want him to come around. I want to maintain a personal relationship with him, so person that he can see in my eyes that I love him, and that I'm the only person in his prison that is going to be there for him. None of his buddies will be there for him. They are only as friends as long as he serves their interests. As an old and very sad rock song goes, "everybody is searching for something". We are all searching, but most of us are searching in the wrong places. There is only one place to find life and happiness.

If I were a perfect man, this would not cause so much upheaval in my soul. I'm not a perfect man, so there's pain and anguish in my soul, but with this pain and anguish I try to add prayer. I should add more prayer, but at least I add some prayer. It might be that I pray for this man for the rest of my life and never see him again. It might be that I hear things that happen with him and by him from those who know him, and that the news continues to be bad it might be that I find that he eventually disavows his baptism completely. None of that should matter to me. All that should matter to me is that I have a relationship with him because I love him and because I know him, and because I pray for him.

When I went to this prison, the total expenses for the trip were close to \$300. For \$300 I saw one man. My rational part, that is the sinful part, thanks that this is not a good expenditure of funds, because after all the prison ministry funds are not inexhaustible. But the part of me that is Christian - and that part, with God's help is growing - says that nothing that we do in the name of Christ comes

back empty to us. It might feel empty, but God knows all things, and God can do anything He wishes. We are just instruments of His mercy. We are privileged as human beings, who are full of sin and corruption, to reach out to others and to be part of God's economy and perhaps to bring them in some way to incorruption. Of course, we cannot cause them to be incorrupt: only the Great Physician can heal, but the Great Physician expects us to contact others on His behalf. That's all that I am doing. He doesn't expect us to have success in every moment, or perhaps very many successes at all. All that matters is that we love, and we act on that love. It's not easy, but it is the way of life, and it is the only way of life.

Links

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