



Mark D. Baker

Going to jail

I go to jail every Tuesday afternoon. Please join me. Walking into the Fresno County Jail, I show the guard my ID card and proceed through four locked doors before a guard lets me into the room I use for a Bible study with any who want to attend.

Six men, wearing red jump suits with “Prisoner” on the back, file in. After reading Mark 1:15, I ask what “repent” means. They say, “to confess your sin, to turn around, change direction.” Jason, who is a new Christian, asks, “Why is it that even though I have repented, I keep heading back the other direction and do things I should not do?”

“Good question,” I say and silently pray: “What do I say, God?” I could give a theologically correct response, but he is not looking for information. He has repented. He has experienced God transforming his life but wants to know why he still stumbles.

I invite the others to respond. They tell what they find helpful: spending more time reading their Bible, praying with others, sharing with a fellow Christian, resisting the devil, staying away from old friends, etc.

I share other ideas and start wrapping up so we can begin our prayer time. An inmate blurts out, “I can’t mess up again. If I sell drugs again I will be in prison for a long time. What do I do?” Steve talks about how much he is praying, and how it is helpful, but he had tried this before, gone to church, spoken in tongues, etc., but it has not worked.

Moved, I again pray for guidance, then start asking questions. Steve tells us he has a college degree, had a good job and a nice house, but when money got tight he turned to selling drugs. He acknowledges being driven by concern of what others think of him. Selling drugs provided money to keep up appearances.

I tell them of a friend with a good job who bought a new house. I visited and found the living room totally empty—no furniture. Why? They had used up their money. I ask, “What would most people do?” The group says most people would beg, borrow or steal to get furniture rather than have an empty living room, fearing what people would think.

We talk about society’s lies—that more things equal a better life, that people with more money deserve more respect. I then say that trusting that God

loves us and trusting and obeying what Jesus teaches about money can deflate those lies.

Our hour is up. I encourage Steve to imagine himself back in his house with half the possessions he currently has and then to think of himself resting in God’s loving embrace as he imagines what others might say about him. I say a quick, heartfelt, prayer for the men. The guard comes to take them back to their cells.

Heading home I reflect over the study. The depth of sincerity, urgency and authenticity of Jason’s and Steve’s questions impresses me. I renew my commitment to regularly return to themes of shame, forgiveness, God’s compassionate embrace and the countercultural character of discipleship. I also have a deep sense of humility and realism. I want Steve to be able to resist the pull to sell drugs again, and I commit myself to bolstering his ability to do so. But it is only an hour a week. He needs so much more—especially when he gets out.

Mark Baker is associate professor of mission and theology at MB Biblical Seminary, now part of Fresno Pacific University in Fresno, Calif.