

Sermon 38, Prisoner Theology, Ephesians 4:1-3

Proposition: Prison ministry and prison prayer should bring about prison spirituality.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I was speaking last week with a gentleman here in town who worked at the Wyoming state prison for 13 years and is now working in the VOA's halfway house. This man has decades of experience with prisoners. Well, as I was speaking to him, he mentioned that God lives in the intake unit of a prison because so many people find Him there. When I questioned the reality of such a claim, he added that 90% of the people in prison profess a faith of some kind, and he believes the majority of such professions are real. Well, the conversation went on and he said that one of the most difficult parts of the halfway house environment is that it contains both people coming out of prison and transitioning back to ordinary society, on the one hand, and also first-time offenders who were sentenced to the halfway house instead of anything harsher, on the other. And then he added the intriguing point, the point that is why I'm telling you this story right now. He said (and I paraphrase from memory), "The prison veterans have a very hard time with the new guys. The new guys get on their nerves to no end. The prisoners who have served their time tell me that the new guys just don't have respect. They close doors too loudly."

Brothers and sisters, that's why I've titled this sermon "Prisoner Theology." Paul exhorts us to demonstrate a profound respect for one another — but he takes it deeper. Prisoners, I assume, learn respect because if they lack it, they will be beaten up badly until it is deeply ingrained in them. The men I've known who spent years in prison always maintain that careful reserve; there is passion under the surface, but they are incredibly wary of letting it out. But we are called not simply to respect, even to profound respect. The kind of respect that prison inculcates might be thought of as primarily an outward demeanor, an outward way of making sure that you don't mortally offend anyone else inside the tiny closed spaces of a prison. But

Paul insists not only on a specific outward demeanor, but also on a fitting inward attitude. That demeanor is indeed what we could call “respect,” but the inner attitude is the one that we label “humility.” Brothers and sisters, what we have in front of us this evening is prison theology at its best. God had already found Paul long before Paul went into this prison — but we see in our text tonight that prison prayer and prison ministry work themselves out in prison spirituality, and that this prison spirituality is profoundly relevant to our life together in the church.

I. The Foundation: Paul’s Prison Prayer and Prison Ministry, 3:1-4:1a

The foundation of this evening’s exhortation is found in ch. 3, where Paul describes at length first his prison ministry and then his prison prayer. Notice how he talks about these things. He calls himself the prisoner of Christ in 3:1, and then describes how his ministry is to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ and to light up God’s plan for everyone. He then prays a prison prayer, one that we’ve spent the last 7 weeks looking at together. It’s in light of these two components of ch. 3 that he says “Therefore” at the beginning of ch. 4. In other words, the prison spirituality that this prisoner-apostle is about to teach us has its foundation in the ministry he exercised and the prayers he prayed while he was imprisoned for the sake of the people he was attempting to minister to.

In short, brothers and sisters, you and I need to learn respect. We can no longer be like the newbies in the halfway house, people who manifest irritating behavior and don’t care whether we are offending our fellow saints. We are called to prison spirituality— even if we’re not in prison and have never been in prison! You and I need to walk in the Holy Spirit and show heartfelt respect, love, and humility to one another. We need to have the heart reality. Prison can give the external behavior, but only the Holy Spirit can make us live like true prisoners of Jesus Christ.

Have you internalized the reality of Paul’s prison ministry and the scope of his prison prayer? I realize that none of us is actually a prisoner. By and large, I assume, the members of the Ephesian church weren’t prisoners either. But nonetheless, for them as for us, Paul’s message is that we need to live like prisoners for Jesus. The glorious doctrines of chs. 1 & 2, the glorious ministry and prayer of ch. 3, are worthless unless they result in the walk of unity, purity, harmony, and victory that Paul is going to describe between now and ch. 6. Paul’s ministry isn’t an end in itself; it has as a goal the moral reformation of the church and of the individual believer.

II. The Exhortation: Corporate Prison Spirituality, 4:1-3

And so, Paul’s ministry and his prayer stream together into this powerful exhortation, an urging that is little short of directly commanding. Based on the truths he’s declared about our salvation by the Triune God and our unity within the one body which is the church, Paul now begs us, urges us, entreats us, beseeches us, pleads with us to exercise corporate prison spirituality. Like a Holy Spirit-filled prisoner, show respect; show humility; maintain the peaceful unity that the Holy Spirit brings. In prison, you learn not to irritate people because you’re going to be living in close quarters for a very long time. But in the church, we’re going to be living together for a lot

longer than 20 or 40 years. We are going to be together forever in Heaven — and so Paul urges to walk out a genuine prison spirituality.

A. A Walk Together, vv. 1-3

The first thing I want to point out about this walk the great apostle urges on us is that it is a corporate walk. The text, of course, doesn't say "Keep in mind that this is a corporate walk." Instead, it presupposes this truth throughout. The words for "you" are plural. The commands are all about virtues that can only be exercised in community. And the culminating points require the presence of others with whom to bear and with whom to maintain unity. In other words, brothers and sisters, this passage is one of the many in the New Testament that makes no sense without church membership and church participation. The lone ranger Christian has already given up on maintaining unity. The Christian who never comes to church, who is never around other believers, doesn't have to show them respect. He doesn't have to be gentle, patient, or forbearing. In other words, if you are a lone ranger Christian, these commands don't apply to you! And so you're clearly something that Paul didn't envision — a person chosen by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and sealed by the Holy Spirit who doesn't walk that out by participating in the colorblind church and who doesn't think that these commands apply to him. If this is the case with you, then you are not the kind of person you were called to be. No: the text here is abundantly clear. This walk is a corporate walk; this walk that the apostle urges us to walk is a walk together with our Christian brothers and sisters. Are you part of a large biological family? That's wonderful. The church is an addition to your family. Are you single, orphaned, an only child, childless? Even if you are, God has given you another family: the church. And you are called to walk out your response to Paul's prison prayer and prison ministry by exercising prison spirituality in company with your fellow saints.

B. A Walk that Fits Your Calling, v. 1b

So this corporate walk is described here as a "worthy" walk. What does that mean? That you need to live a lifestyle appropriate to your calling. You need to behave in a way that's fitting for your identity. You can tell how much social mores have changed when you realize that Calvin illustrated this principle by saying that a nobleman would be shamed if he did the work of a peasant. These days, we might think more of a high-class person who got down and dirty and changed the oil on his own BMW. But anyway, the point is that you are called to live in a way that squares with your calling and identity. To state the obvious, if you are a Christian then you shouldn't live like a Satanist! If you're a Christian, then you shouldn't engage in the religious practices of a Hindu.

Now, we see this word "worthy" and sometimes get the wrong idea. My pastor illustrated this with a movie reference years ago, in a way that I'll never forget. Apparently (and I didn't check up on this personally) at the end of *Saving Private Ryan*, after Private Ryan has been saved, one of the men who saved him is lying there wounded and dying. He grabs Ryan, shakes him a little bit, and says "Deserve it!" In other words, of course, deserve the sacrifice that all these men made to save you, Ryan!

When we read “Walk worthy of your calling,” we tend to take it as a *Saving Private Ryan*-esque charge to deserve Christ’s sacrifice and the church’s support. Do you see this crucifix? Deserve it, Christian! Do you see Christ’s suffering? Do you see everything that this church has done for you? Deserve it!

That can be what we hear when we hear “Walk worthy.” But as my pastor then commented, “That’s completely wrong and backwards.” There is no way you ever can or will deserve Christ’s sacrifice. There is no way you ever can or will deserve all the benefits you have received from the church. You don’t deserve it, and you won’t deserve it. It’s a gift. Maybe that character wanted Private Ryan to earn his saving. But God doesn’t want us to earn our salvation. That’s not what “worthy” means here. It means “fitting, appropriate.” Walk in a way congruent to your calling, not so that you can begin to deserve such a calling but rather so that you can be what you’re called to be. What kind of person should a Christian be? He should be as much like Christ as possible, not so that he can deserve Christ’s sacrifice but rather because he loves that sacrifice and wants to imitate it. The call of Jesus Christ is not “deserve Me” but “be like Me.”

C. A Walk that Demonstrates Humility, v. 2

And how exactly can you be like this? What are the key points of your calling? Paul lists four character qualities and activities that are non-negotiable for the Christian’s calling. If you are going to manifest prison spirituality, then you have to manifest these traits.

1. Lowliness

The first trait is lowliness — the opposite of thinking of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Now, does lowliness mean always saying “I’m so low. I’m such a worm. I’m the dirt beneath the totem pole. I’m a doormat”? No! It means having an accurate picture of yourself. It means seeing yourself as you really are.

I was at the Chevy dealer here in town while writing part of this sermon, and one of the features I saw advertised in the new models of car was a “360-degree back-up camera”. The ad contained a picture of what you would see on your dash display with this feature, and it was amazing. It literally was a picture of the car taken from directly above. It was as though Chevy had figured out how to suspend a camera 20 feet above the car and show you your car and everything in a 10-foot radius around it in real time. At first, looking at the picture, I wondered whether these cars had huge camera cranes on them — or maybe a paired drone that takes off and sends a video feed whenever you put your car in reverse? But actually, there is no aerial camera. That image comes from cameras on the four corners of the car whose images are stitched together around a pre-existing photo of the car from above.

Brothers and sisters, that, I think, is a perfect metaphor for this issue of humility. Chevy has developed a way in which you can see your car from an outside perspective. You can look at yourself as though you were flying 20 feet above your vehicle. It’s like an out-of-(auto)body experience! Yet instead of creating this accurate picture of yourself digitally, your call and mine, as practitioners of prison spirituality, is to create this accurate picture of ourselves spiritually. Guess who can show yourself from a bird’s-eye view? Right. The sacred Dove who is the Holy

Spirit. He is always 20 feet above you, watching you, seeing you exactly as you are. But the amazing thing, the stunning thing, is that he will share that video feed with you. He does it through this ancient technology called a codex. That's right: this special codex works as a mirror in which you can see yourself, but this time not from your own perspective but rather from the Holy Spirit's perspective. Do you know what this codex is called? You own one. It's called a Bible. And whoever looks into it and continues in it can see himself accurately, just as the Holy Spirit perceives him. So says the letter of James.

Do you make use of the mirror of the word and attempt to see yourself as you really are? Do you regularly entreat the Holy Spirit to give you His Dove's-eye view? Or are you happy with the reality distortion field we call selfishness and cognitive dissonance?

Remember how one counselor counseled a very bitter person and said, "You're very bitter" and the counselee said "No I'm not." So the counselor said "Keep a diary for five weeks." Then the counselor had the counselee read his own diary, and the counselee said, amazed, "Wow! This is the diary of a very bitter person."

Brothers and sisters, without the Holy Spirit feeding you that Dove's-eye view through the Word, you will never see yourself rightly. You will never be humble. Our natural condition is pride and arrogance, whether in its normal form or in its reverse form. Ordinary pride, of course, says "I'm great and wonderful and if you question my wonderfulness I will jump down your throat." Reverse pride says "I'm horrible and awful and terrible and I can't stand myself, and if you say something nice about me I'll jump down your throat." What both of these forms of pride have in common is the obsession with self. Both of them think only of themselves! Humility, though, is not thinking less of yourself. It is thinking of yourself less. The lowliness that Paul urges us to manifest is a lifestyle in which we think accurately of ourselves and self has its appropriate place, neither flattered nor denigrated. Most of us bully ourselves or flatter ourselves. But the truly humble person, who sees himself from above with the Holy Spirit's 360-degree camera, thinks of himself exactly as he is and thinks of himself exactly as often as necessary and no more often.

This is the first step to prison spirituality. This is the first way in which you manifest that you want to be like Christ. He thought of Himself exactly as He was. He thought of Himself exactly as much as He needed to. He was completely humble.

2. Gentleness

In the same way, Christ was completely meek, or gentle. The word "meekness" has been ruined by the world; as I quoted two years ago when preaching on "Blessed are the meek," one contemporary pundit (Anthony Lane) could write that so-and-so "comes across as whiny and meek." Clearly the whiny kind of meekness is not a virtue. That's why most modern translations say "Gentle." But that is this gentleness, then? It is far more than simply not being physically rough. It is even more than not being physically or verbally rough. In fact, this meekness or gentleness means an utter refusal to resent an injury.

Are you there? Do you have all gentleness, such that you truly do not resent it when someone hurts you? Yeah, I'm not there either. But again, remember, this is prison spirituality. In prison, you learn not to show any outward resentment when someone hurts you. You learn that respect. But Paul demands that we not only learn outward respect, but that we learn inward respect too — that we be so content with Christ, and so much like Christ, that we truly do not resent being hurt.

3. Patience

The third element of prison spirituality is patience. The NKJV has “longsuffering.” Patience is, like meekness, the ability to bear injuries without resentment, to suffer evil without responding in evil. Patience is, as Thomas Aquinas says, a part of courage. You cannot manifest this prison spirituality without being brave enough to endure suffering.

Have you ever lived or worked with an impatient person? It gets on the nerves very quickly. I always say that I don't mind driving in traffic, but it really annoys me to ride in traffic with someone who gets really steamed over the traffic! But if you have been paying attention to Paul's prison ministry and prison prayer, then your prison spirituality will have this component of patience. You will be like Christ, who is always patient with you.

4. Bearing with One Another in Love

Finally, prison spirituality manifests itself through bearing with one another in love. Again, in prison you have to learn to bear with others. If you don't, then you will probably die. But Paul takes that outward sense of bearing with others and adds to it this inward heart of love. To not only bear with the absolutely ridiculous, absurd, maddening words and actions of your fellow saints, but to love those saints too — this is the call that is on your life. This is the only lifestyle appropriate to one who has been forgiven so much. This is the only walk that someone who really understands that God in Christ has forgiven him and bears with him can really walk!

Now, there are two further points I want to highlight here. First of all, Paul's vision of church life involves a lot of bearing with one another. He says that in the church, you are inevitably going to encounter ideas and practices (and people) you don't like and don't agree with, and that you still need to love those people regardless. And secondly, in order to bear with one another you've got to spend time with one another! I've mentioned before how my dad employed a truck driver who was home two nights a month and who had a great marriage. He and his wife never had to bear with one another, and so long as she was in Fort Collins and he was in Tucumcari, they had a great relationship. Well, brothers and sisters, if we see each for one hour and 10 minutes each week, and one hour and seven minutes of that is a scripted worship service, then there's not going to be a lot of need for bearing with one another. It's when you're actually in each other's homes five hours a week, when you're at the park together for two hours, when you're working together or playing together, that you actually begin to need to bear with one another, and be patient, and be meek, and be humble.

So ask yourself: When's the last time you bore with a fellow saint in love? And is it something that, based on your lifestyle choices, you're going to end up doing more or less of

over time? In other words, is this a command that you seriously expect to keep? Or is it a command you're doing your best to avoid?

D. A Walk that Keeps the Spirit's Peaceful Unity, v. 3

Well, the final component of this walk, of this prison spirituality that Paul wants to inculcate in us, is a constant effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Now, this phrase is one of the complicated phrases that Paul likes to use. In what sense is peace a bond? And how does it relate to the unity of the Spirit?

If you're reading this passage in Greek, the word "bond" jumps out at you because it contains the same root as the word for "prisoner" in vs. 1. The bond of peace is the "tie that binds" — that is, it is the mutually shared desires and goals that keep us together. This can be seen at a very low level in the case of public transportation. When I'm riding the underground train to from the terminal to the concourses at Denver International Airport, I have a chance to get off at Concourse A and Concourse B. But if I'm going to Concourse C, I stay on the train all the way until it stops at Concourse C. And so do all the other passengers who are going to Concourse C. We are at peace with one another because we all share a particular goal (getting to Concourse C) and a chosen method for achieving that goal (riding the underground train). There is a bond of peace in one particular respect that keeps us all together as we ride that train.

But Paul says that in the church, we too have a bond of peace. Only our peace in the church is not simply the peace of sharing one goal and one method; our peace is supposed to be the result of sharing every goal and every method of reaching those goals. Our entire lives should be oriented the same way as those of our brothers and sisters in here. We should be bound together as a community of people who all want the same thing, who all agree on the method of getting it, and who have decided to seek it together. What we want is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever. We want to live to God, through Christ. And we want to do it through worship and fellowship. This, my friends, is the bond of peace. It is not a physical bond. It is not an electromagnetic bond. It is not a legal bond. It is a spiritual bond — that is, a bond generated by the Holy Spirit of God. As soon as the peace of the church is broken, that bond is snapped. How do you break peace? You simply want something different than those around you, and/or pursue what you want in a way that they consider illegitimate. Peace is the union of the appetite's inclinations with themselves and with the inclinations of others. If your appetite no longer desires to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, then you have broken the bond of peace. If your appetite no longer desires to pursue God in the same way we do here at Harvest, but rather through some other means (say, a choir and orchestra on Sunday mornings), then you have broken the bond of peace.

This bond of peace is also described as the unity of the Spirit. What does that mean? It means that the unity we have, in which our desires and our methods for fulfilling them all point the same direction, is a product of the Holy Spirit. He shapes our desires so that we want the same things. He binds us together with the bond of peace, and in that binding we find unity.

This unity is objective; it is the product of the Spirit's work. Yet at the same time, we can damage it. Hence, Paul urges us to be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The word here does indeed mean very eager or speeding. Do you hasten to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? Do you do your very best to align your heart's desires and methods with those of your brothers and sisters? While the NIV's "make every effort" may be a little stronger than the Greek warrants, the fact remains that this peace is vital. The Spirit attains it, but we maintain it.

When is the last time you gave up what you wanted for the sake of what the rest of the church wanted?

Now, in one sense, this issue of church unity begins and ends with the local congregation. The fact of the matter is that your ecumenical projects are garbage if you can't get along with the person in the pew next to you. Dreams of a single organizational umbrella under which every church on the face of the earth can be assembled are fine, and maybe even good. But unless and until we can get along with each other in the local church by demonstrating humility, meekness, longsuffering, and bearing with one another in love, we will never have such organizational unity. Besides, the unity here, as elsewhere in the New Testament, is fundamentally a unity of the Spirit. That is where our efforts must be focused — on keeping in step with the Spirit. If we do, He will bring about the organizational unity. And if we don't, then our organizational unity will be ultimately un-Christian because it lacks the Holy Spirit.

What about the fact the the various churches today are so deeply divided? Ultimately, I would say that this passage indicates that everyone who has the Holy Spirit can agree with everyone else on the essentials. And the closer we all get to the Spirit, the more we will agree with each other across denominational boundaries. In the meantime, brothers and sisters, let's focus on agreeing with each other right here and now. Let's show that respect that prison spirituality demands. Could we get along if we were all hauled off to prison together and left there for the next 60 years? Is our prison spirituality that strong? If it's not, then go back to Ephesians 1-3. Glory again in the spiritual blessings you've received, and entreat the Spirit's help to make you truly grateful. Above all, focus on the one Lord whom we all share. Walk worthy of your mighty calling. Amen.