

OVERVIEW:

“Mass incarceration is the New Jim Crow.” “Solitary confinement is torture.” “Black Lives Matter.” Congregations are pelted with information about America’s criminal justice system and its harms. For many Christians, it seems clear that criminal justice reform is needed. But what does that mean? And how far should it go?

Our current system of imprisonment is plagued by inhumanity and injustice. From our continuing practice of capital punishment to the thousands of people serving life without parole – a sentence to die in prison – to our widespread reliance on long-term solitary confinement, defined by the United Nations as torture, as a disciplinary tool, our prison system over-punishes at great cost. Prisoners face de-facto additional penalties besides loss of liberty based on dehumanizing prison conditions ranging from inadequate healthcare and separation from family to inedible food, dangerous levels of heat with no air conditioning, violence and brutality from other prisoners and guards, and even sexual assault and rape. Our system is racist and unequal: people of color are incarcerated at disproportionate rates, and poor people languish in jails awaiting trial while the rich are able to pay for their freedom on bail. And sometimes our sentences are grossly unjust, as for thousands of nonviolent drug offenders serving decades or life in prison due to mandatory minimums. Something must be done to fix our criminal justice system!

But prison abolitionists believe that incarceration as a system is impossible to fix. The aims of incarcerating criminals – separating them from society, punishing them in a way commensurate to the crime, rehabilitating them to return them safely to society, meeting the needs of victims of crime – are incompatible. Our prisons are inhumane because they’re designed to punish – which will always limit how much effort towards rehabilitation they can make. Locking people up doesn’t deal with the realities of why people commit crimes. Nor does it provide anything for those who have been harmed by crime.

Prison abolition is a long-standing activist goal and philosophy, but white Christians have generally not been deeply involved in the prison-abolitionist movement. But we believe that prison abolition is not just an important progressive or radical cause, but also an essential witness to the compassionate justice of the kingdom of God and the reality of our reconciliation to God and one another in Jesus Christ.

This study provides a brief introduction to prison-abolitionist theology, focusing on four key ideas and New Testament texts. As prison abolitionists, we choose to read the biblical witness in light of Jesus’ understanding that the reign of God means freeing the prisoners. This study focuses on texts that help develop the theological basis for activism against prisons and every form of injustice, especially in the ways we respond to crime and harm in our society.

This study is appropriate for a congregation that has some awareness of prison or criminal justice issues or a history of criminal-justice advocacy, but which is looking for a deeper abolitionist understanding.

Updated October 2021

GOALS:

- To develop an understanding of the basic theological ideas underlying Christian prison abolitionist activism and their support in particular New Testament passages
- To learn a new interpretation of familiar biblical passages and see them with new eyes
- To discover the flaws inherent in any system of imprisonment, and the possibilities for alternative non-retributive forms of justice as a way of responding to crime and harm

SUMMARY:

SESSION 1:

- *Theme:* Jesus declares freedom to prisoners
- *Text:* Luke 4:17-21
- *Key idea:* The reign of God that Jesus announces is about literal freedom for prisoners, not just spiritual freedom or healing. Jesus has inaugurated God's reign, so we should seek freedom for prisoners to bring it to fruition.

SESSION 2:

- *Theme:* Jesus' death on the cross as an act of reconciliation
- *Text:* Luke 23:32-43
- *Key idea:* Jesus identifies himself with prisoners with the promise of their freedom and salvation even at the point of death, and models forgiveness rather than retribution as a response to harm done. Jesus' death and resurrection insist on an end to retribution and punishment as a response to harm.

SESSION 3:

- *Theme:* God's justice always takes place in community, but prisons are places of banishment from community
- *Text:* Matthew 18:12-14, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21
- *Key idea:* God's justice is worked out in community, not alone, and leads toward reconciliation, not isolation. But prisons are designed to separate offenders from communities and isolate them.

SESSION 4:

- *Theme:* Jesus' identification with prisoners is part of God's new creation
- *Text:* Matthew 25:31-46
- *Key idea:* "Visiting the prisoners" isn't just a command given to us to be like Jesus, but the beginning of a new imagination of what the reign of God looks like. We go to prisons because God is already there, transforming the world until there are no more prisons.

Biblical passages are quoted in the New Revised Standard Version.

The reign of God that Jesus announces is about literal freedom for prisoners, not just spiritual freedom or healing. Jesus has inaugurated God's reign, so we should seek freedom for prisoners to bring it to fruition.

Nazareth, Saturday morning. Jesus has been baptized and has faced the devil in the wilderness, and now he's returned home ready to declare that the Promised Land is here. He reads the prophecy of Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Everyone is amazed at the power in his words – until they realize that his promise means something bigger and different than what they expected.

As prison abolitionists, we often have a similar experience with these words of Jesus. Our convictions are based, quite simply, on the belief that when Jesus announces that the reign of God means setting the prisoners free, we should take him at his word. We believe that there is no room for prisons in God's new creation, and therefore that as followers of Jesus it's our job to make prisons obsolete here on earth, living out the promise that Jesus has declared is already accomplished. But when we take Jesus at his word, we're often met with skepticism, disbelief, and fear: "What about serial killers?" "How can we maintain safety in our communities without prisons or police?" "Isn't it a disgrace not to punish people for their crimes?" "Why not just make prisons better for rehabilitation of those incarcerated?"

These are real and difficult questions – questions that demand practical answers as well as answers of faith. Throughout the next four weeks we'll consider the realities of prisons and what alternative forms of justice can look like, as well as examining the biblical and theological case for prison abolition.

In practice, there's a strong case that prisons as they currently exist (and especially the explosion of mass incarceration in the United States) are a modern invention. Part of what we do, as prison abolitionists, is question the status quo, because the fact is that prisons aren't doing the job we expect them to do. Prisons don't make us safer or make our society more just. We incarcerate ten times as many people as we did forty years ago, but the crime rate hasn't declined correspondingly. We incarcerate people for far longer than any other country does for the same crimes, despite evidence that people quickly "age out" of violence and that the elderly are no threat to public safety. Our criminal justice system has roots in slavery and still operates in a racist way: 1 in 3 black men will be incarcerated at some point in their lives. Prisoners labor for far less than minimum wage, a vestige of slavery remaining in our society. Our prisons are violent and inhumane, and prisoners face conditions from inedible food and inadequate healthcare to physical and sexual assault. We still execute people and make use of long-term solitary confinement, which the United Nations defines as torture. There are many reasons to abolish prisons on secular and humanitarian grounds.

But ultimately, the question of prisons is a question of faith. We believe Jesus when he says there are no prisons under God's gracious reign. And then we ask, "What would it take for us to change our society so that prisons were no longer necessary?" That's the path of our discipleship.

There are strong biblical reasons to take Jesus at his word when he proclaims freedom for the prisoners. Author Lee Griffith notes that the entire history of Israel is constructed on the narrative of freedom of the captives: first, the freedom of the Israelites when they were slaves in Egypt, and then their freedom and return to the Promised Land when they were imprisoned in Babylon. And he points out that the obligation of freedom is built

into the liturgical and legal traditions of Israel through the Sabbath and Jubilee years when debts were released and slaves were set free. Throughout the history of Israel, God is revealed as the God who sets prisoners free.¹

When Jesus quotes the prophecy of Isaiah in the synagogue, he's drawing on that tradition of the Sabbath and Jubilee years – “the year of the Lord's favor.” His promise that he was sent to proclaim freedom to the prisoners can be understood in light of the legal traditions of freeing captives within the Torah as well as the symbolic importance of freeing captives to Israel's history. God's reign is a reign of liberation. Jesus announces that it's already present.²

We believe that prison abolition is an important cause for Christians not because it will lead us to a safer and more just society (although it will) nor because prisons are inhumane and cruel (although they are) but because abolition offers a real picture of the reign of God, available to us here in our world today. Every step we take towards setting the prisoners free is a step following in the footsteps of Jesus the Divine Liberator.

¹ Lee Griffith, *The Fall of The Prison: Biblical Perspectives on Prison Abolition*, 97-102.

² See Griffith's discussion of this passage in *The Fall of the Prison*, 108-112.

SESSION 1
JESUS' MISSION TO PROCLAIM FREEDOM TO PRISONERS

PRAY Psalm 146

Go around the circle reading the psalm, with each person reading one verse.

READ Luke 4:17-21

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

DISCUSS

- Jesus’ mission, as he describes it, has multiple elements: “to proclaim good news to the poor, freedom to prisoners, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set the oppressed free; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” What connections do you see between these elements? How are the oppressions of poverty, prison, and blindness/illness related in today’s society?
- What is “the year of the Lord’s favor” and how does it relate to the freeing of prisoners? Does the concept of ‘jubilee’ seem to have a natural connection to setting prisoners free, or does that seem like an unusual interpretation of its meaning? What do you think the connections drawn between the economic meaning of jubilee as being set free from debt and its association with freedom from imprisonment have to say to us, in a society where “it’s better to be rich and guilty than poor and innocent” when dealing with the criminal justice system?

Jesus identifies himself with prisoners with the promise of their freedom and salvation even at the point of death, and models forgiveness rather than retribution as a response to harm done. Jesus' death and resurrection insist on an end to retribution and punishment as a response to harm.

We've already examined the way that Jesus' ministry calls for setting the prisoners free, beginning with the claims he makes the first time he preaches in the synagogue of Nazareth in the Gospel of Luke, and the way this call is in line with the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. Jesus tells us that there is no room for prisons in the reign of God.

But Jesus' ministry doesn't lead him to a triumphant reign as his followers expected of the Messiah, but instead to the cross. What do Jesus' death and resurrection have to show us about the way we live out justice in the kingdom of God?

If we are honest, we will admit that one of the impulses towards incarceration in our society is for retribution – prisons are intended to be punitive for people who've committed crimes. In fact, part of why it's hard to create prisons that effectively rehabilitate prisoners is this retributive impulse: for every effort to make prisons more rehabilitative, by offering better education programs, for example, or easier ways to stay in contact with family, or more humane conditions that encourage prisoners to build community within the prison walls, we hear a complaint that the prisoners are 'getting off too easy' or that 'doing time isn't supposed to be summer camp.' Our desire to see bad people punished is inextricably interwoven into our understanding of justice. But Jesus' death and resurrection offers us a new way of thinking about the relationship between punishment and justice.

Jesus going to his death offers only compassion and forgiveness, not a desire for retribution. He is killed as a prisoner and thus identified with prisoners (as author Lee Griffith reminds us).³ And on his way to the cross he does not demand retribution from God for the harm done to him, but instead promises grace and forgiveness. To the thief crucified beside him he promises new life with him in paradise without delay ("today you will be with me in paradise!"). And even to those clamoring for his death, he prays for God's forgiveness upon them. His example shows us a new way vision of justice – a kind of justice that does not depend upon punishment to make things even, but instead upon healing to make things right.

It's important to comment here on the use of capital punishment in the Old Testament law, which provides a background for any discussion of retribution in the Bible and context for the crucifixion of Jesus. As Griffith points out, capital punishment in the Old Testament is encouraged as *expiation* rather than *retribution*: Israel is commanded to kill offenders in order to purify the people and the land, not as punishment. This law as written to Israel as a whole is a picture of God's desire for Israel to be pure and holy, but it shouldn't be understood as blanket support for retributive killing. It's not clear to what extent the capital punishment provisions of the Torah were ever put into practice in Israel, Griffith argues⁴, and later Jewish teaching has emphasized mercy rather than the need for executions. As Christians we also have to consider expiation in light of Jesus' death on the cross. By becoming the victim of capital punishment, Jesus shows the violence of it and undoes the logic of it.

³ *The Fall of the Prison*, 125-126.

⁴ *The Fall of the Prison*, 90.

And the same goes for retribution more generally. As Christians, we believe that Jesus' death and resurrection conquered death. We can also say that by his death and resurrection, Jesus conquered the need for punishment and retribution in order to say that 'justice has been done.' Jesus promises us, through his death and his forgiveness of those who killed him, that further violence in the form of punishment is not necessary to have real justice. Justice is about accountability and healing, without punishment.

There are a variety of theories of how the atonement works – how Jesus' death and resurrection save us. Substitutionary theories of atonement have been used to reify systems of punishment and scapegoating, as Rev. Dr. Nikia Smith Robert lays out.⁵ Yet even in substitutionary traditions, an end of punishment can sometimes be seen, as pastor and author Morgan Guyton writes: "Punishment for the sake of punishment has no place in Christian ethics if Jesus' cross really does absorb all the punishment for the world's sins."⁶

There are also other ways of understanding how Jesus' death and resurrection reconcile us to God, and how that reconciliation points us to a new form of justice. Robert describes the way that Jesus' solidarity with the criminalized opens new forms of transformation and healing. Ched Myers and Elaine Enns describe Jesus' forgiveness of those crucifying him as "an act of victim-initiated reconciliation."⁷ The Risen Christ inaugurates a reign of justice that is separate from punishment.

When we stop thinking of punishment as a response to harm done, the entire project of prisons (and the collateral consequences that follow from felony conviction, like loss of employability, disconnection from family and community, and so on) becomes hard to justify. Prisons are designed to inflict suffering as much as to separate offenders from communities. Even though it's been proven that locking more people up doesn't decrease the crime rate and that in fact incarcerating people makes them *more* likely to commit further crimes, prisons are still considered justified because the people there "deserve punishment." But Jesus, crucified and risen, calls us to demand in practice new forms of justice that are based in compassion and healing, not retribution.

⁵ Nikia Smith Robert, "Penitence, Plantation, and the Penitentiary: a Liberation Theology for Lockdown America," in *The Graduate Journal of Harvard Divinity School*, 2017, https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/files/hdsjournal/files/61292_graduate_journal_2017_web.pdf.

⁶ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/mercynotsacrifice/2014/11/20/if-you-need-for-undocumented-immigrants-to-be-punished-then-you-dont-believe-in-jesus-cross/>

⁷ *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume 1*, 13.

SESSION 2
JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS AS AN ACT OF RECONCILIATION

PRAY Psalm 22

Go around the circle reading the psalm, with each person reading one verse.

READ Luke 23:32-43

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

DISCUSS

- Karl Barth said the criminals crucified along with Jesus were "the first certain, indissoluble, and indestructible Christian community."⁸ What do you think of this statement? What does it mean that a criminal is one of the individuals to whom Jesus explicitly promises entrance into heaven?
- Scholars Ched Myers and Elaine Enns write that in the sacrifice on the cross, "God models in Christ the practice of victim-initiated reconciliation."⁹ What does it mean for us that God, identifying in solidarity with the victims of every crime, forgives us through Christ's death? How should this affect the ways we respond to crime and harm in our society?
- Historically the church has held a variety of atonement theologies: for example, substitutionary atonement, which holds that Christ died in our place on the cross, bearing the punishment for our sins; 'Christus Victor' theology, which holds that Jesus, by submitting to death, established power over death and the devil to set us free from the power of death; moral exemplar theory, which holds that by following the beautiful example of Christ's obedient sacrifice for us we are inspired to repent and return to God and thus be forgiven; and others. What does each of these theories have to tell us about the way we respond to crime and harm in our society? What does each tell us about the role of punishment in God's plan for the world?

⁸ "The Criminals with Him" in *Deliverance to the Captives* (Harper, 1961), 77-78.

⁹ *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume 1*, 13.

God's justice is worked out in community, not alone, and leads toward reconciliation, not isolation. But prisons are designed to separate offenders from communities and isolate them.

One of the most difficult questions for prison abolitionists is “Why not just reform the prisons we have? Prisons as they currently exist may be inhumane and unproductive, but we could make them better. Why the call to abolish rather than reform?”

Abolitionists believe that the things that lead prisons to be inhumane and unproductive are inseparable from the existence of incarceration. By design, prisons are intended to separate out the ‘bad people’ from society and banish them away from their communities. But banishment is incompatible with rehabilitation. Author Maya Schenwar explains that relationships within the community are the things that are most likely to help those who have committed crimes make amends, as well as keep them from committing further crimes. But prisons remove prisoners from the situation where they might be supported to make amends. Of particular importance is the relationship between parents and children – nearly every prisoner with children identifies their family as the main reason they want to leave their old life behind. But prisons, by design, separate families. The security precautions required when people are caged, along with the long distances that prisons often place prisoners from their families and the high cost of phone calls, destroy the bonds between prisoners and their loved ones.¹⁰

Christians believe that separation is destructive, to the point that Hell is sometimes described as separation from God. What we learn from the Old Testament law, Jesus’ parables, and the New Testament instructions for the church is that God intends justice to be worked out in community. But prisons isolate people and separate them from community.

Prison abolitionists support alternative forms of justice that can lead to sincere accountability and healing within local communities. Some of these efforts are “restorative justice” or “transformative justice” projects. Restorative justice is generally aimed at a mediated encounter between the victim and the offender, along with representatives of the community, leading to a plan for the offender to make amends. Some key elements of a restorative justice process are the following:

- The offender must take responsibility for the crime or harm done.
- Priority is always given to meeting the needs of the victim and avoiding further harm or trauma to them.
- A restorative justice circle includes the victim and the offender as well as other affected members of the community, like family, friends and community/religious leaders.
- The victim has a chance to tell their story of how the offense affected them, so the offender understands the harm of what they did.
- The offender has a chance to tell their story of the offense – including ways they have been harmed themselves in the past, but also taking responsibility for their current actions. The offender has the opportunity to apologize to the victim.
- The victim and offender along with the community members agree on a plan by which the offender will make amends to the victim, where possible. This can be by direct restitution or further efforts on the

¹⁰ Maya Schenwar, *Locked Down, Locked Out: Why Prison Doesn't Work and How We Can Do Better*, 9-40.

offender's part (to help others who have been hurt in similar ways, for example, or try to teach others so they won't commit the same harm).

- The goal of the process is to meet the victim's needs and make to them the reparations they need to heal from the trauma of being harmed, and to meet the offender's need to heal from the trauma of doing harm.

Transformative justice looks to go deeper to change underlying conditions that led to the harm/crime done. For example, transformative justice programs look to help get people out of gangs by providing them alternative communities and jobs, as Fr. Greg Boyle's Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles does. Or they look to fight sexual harassment and abuse by questioning all-male or patriarchal power structures and bringing more women into positions of power. Or they focus on anti-poverty and education efforts to help prevent crimes from happening in the first place. Offenders can play a key role in transformative justice, helping others in their community avoid the harm that they themselves caused.

Restorative and transformative justice processes have the power to bind communities more deeply and change them. They are based on the understanding that no one is beyond redemption or God's love. As Christian prison abolitionists, we see in Jesus' ministry of hospitality a call to build communities of reconciliation where we do justice in a new way. Restorative and transformative justice processes, rather than incarceration, are a way to live out our belief in reconciliation in practical terms.

PRAY Psalms 133 and 134

Go around the circle reading the psalms, with each person reading one verse.

READ Matthew 18:12-20, 2 Corinthians 5:17-21

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

“What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost. If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

DISCUSS

- The parable of the lost sheep is a commonly-read one, but it's not usually read in the context of the rest of the chapter, which is about forgiveness and processes of reconciliation and church discipline. How does re-reading this parable in a criminal justice context change your interpretation of it?
- Matthew 18:15-20 is often used as an example of the way to resolve conflicts in the church. How is this a pattern for a restorative justice process? What role might restorative justice play in cases of harm or crime done within the church community, in light of this passage?
- Activist and scholar Ched Myers considers the phrase “ambassadors of reconciliation” (see 2 Cor. 5:20) to be one of the most important descriptors of Christians and our vocation.¹¹ What does it mean that those in the church are called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, or are given the ministry of reconciliation? How does that affect our relation to systems of injustice in the secular world? What do you see as your part in the ministry of reconciliation given to every Christian?

¹¹ Ched Myers and Elaine Enns, *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume 1*, 9-14.

“Visiting the prisoners” isn’t just a command given to us to be like Jesus, but the beginning of a new imagination of what the reign of God looks like. We go to prisons because God is already there, transforming the world until there are no more prisons.

Matthew 25:31-46 is a popular text in churches, often quoted in support of outreach ministries: feed the hungry through soup kitchens and sandwich-making ministries, clothe the naked through underwear and sock drives for local homeless people, visit the prisoners through prison ministry and chaplaincy, welcome the stranger through refugee programs, care for the sick through hospital and nursing home visitation. We’re “Matthew 25 Christians” because we care for each other in our society through this work.

But the famous parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is primarily a text about the last days, what the coming reign of God looks like. Jesus promises the inauguration of the reign of God at the beginning of his ministry, as we saw in our study of Luke 4:17-21. But towards the end of his life he returns in more detail to apocalyptic themes: those that reveal the nature of God’s kingdom as it will finally be revealed in eternity. And in the light of eternity, our view of what the parable in Matthew 25 says is far too small. God’s justice – justice understood in the biblical sense of *tzedekah*, which contains the connotation of social justice for all in society¹² – is bigger and more radical than our social programs.

How does justice as it will be when God’s reign is fully realized – at Christ’s *parousia*, or second coming – relate to the way we run our societies today? Many theologians have argued that punishment by the state is allowable now, even if Christians are called to forgiveness, on the basis of Romans 13:1-5: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God’s servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.” But it’s important to read this passage in light of the previous verses in chapter 12 (verses 19-21): “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” In other words: the claim in Romans 13 that the state (or “the authority”) is the agent of vengeance follows directly from an exhortation to Christians not to seek vengeance or punishment in cases of harm against them. The state here is intended to *limit* the retributive impulse of Christians, not to amplify it. Leaving justice to the state is to take the desire for retributive punishment out of the hands of individual believers and leave it up to God, not to encourage them to work out their desire for vengeance through state-sanctioned processes of punishment.

What Romans 13 says is that the “authority” is put in place by God to work out God’s justice. But what does God’s justice look like? Does it look like wrath and vengeance? No! John 3:19 tells us of the judgment of God: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.” God’s judgment was in leaving people in darkness when the light of Christ – the

¹² Lee Griffith, *The Fall of the Prison*, 95.

new restorative way of living – was shown to them. The judgment of God isn't punishment meted out to people but rather that we continue living in violence and sin even though a more just and peaceful way is possible and has been shown to us. And Jesus goes even further to explain the merciful nature of God's judgment in John 12:31-32: "Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The judgment, Jesus says, is precisely his crucifixion. The death of Jesus – the crucifixion of God – is the judgment God has appointed for the world. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord," but the repayment turns out not to be in any punishment against us, worldly or temporal, but instead in the sacrifice of love made on the cross. On the cross, God judges the world and makes real justice, free from vengeance, possible, so that all people are drawn to the love of God.

We are called to live out God's justice – the *tzedekah* or social-justice of God – in this world today. But we are not called to make the state an agent of retribution on God's behalf. God promises that he will avenge wrongdoing so we should not take vengeance ourselves, even through state processes – but God's judgment of wrongdoing turns out to be more merciful than we could have imagined. The Lamb that judges the world is the Lamb who was slain for us (Revelation 5:6).

This ultimate sign of God's justice takes us back to Matthew 25 and the vision of the end times it presents. Because when Jesus appears at the last judgment separating the righteous from the unjust, he tells us that his appearance as our judge isn't the ultimate revelation of who he is. Instead, while sitting as our judge, Jesus identifies himself as the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner: "As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." In the final courtroom, Jesus – who is God almighty – does not appear as the judge but rather as the prisoner in chains.

Lee Griffith ends his discussion of this passage by writing: "So, for Christians all talk of prisoners must begin and end with Christ Jesus. This is the position in which the Word places us. We are so placed that we cannot talk about prisoners without a recognition of Jesus the Prisoner....It is a scandal for all of us good, law-abiding citizens. We can no longer talk of people who are 'paying their debt to society'; we must now talk of people who are robbed of their freedom. We can no longer talk of 'monsters' who deserve to suffer; we must now talk of the call to serve Jesus by serving the least of the prisoners. Whether we hear them with joy or with fear and trembling, the Word so places us that we must hear the words of Jesus: the Good News is freedom for the prisoners."¹³

As Christians, we live in the present reality always anticipating the fullness of the reign of God which is always-already present for us. There are no prisons separating people from the love of God in that reign, where Jesus identifies himself with every prisoner. Ultimately, our support for prison abolition is a sign of our hope in the reconciliation of all in the eternal kingdom to come: as we profess in the Apostles' Creed, "we believe in the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

¹³ *The Fall of the Prison*, 126.

SESSION 4

JESUS' IDENTIFICATION WITH PRISONERS IS PART OF GOD'S NEW CREATION

PRAY Revelation 21:1-5

Go around the circle reading the passage, with each person reading one verse.

READ Matthew 25:31-46

Read the text slowly aloud. If possible, take a few minutes for meditation, then ask someone else to read the text aloud again.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 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 you visited me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

DISCUSS

- This text is a favorite in churches, where it’s often interpreted as a laundry list of suggested actions, or a checklist to ‘prove’ we’re on the right path following Jesus. But what other assumptions underlie the text, if we read it at face value? What does it tell us about Jesus? What does it suggest about the last days and about heaven and hell?
- In his book *The Fall of the Prison*, Lee Griffith writes of the call to visit the prisoners “The Greek term [for visiting] connotes more than spending time with people. The same term is used most often to refer to the divine activity of redeeming and freeing and caring for people...the meaning of the reference to prisoners is clarified if we bear in mind that the text depicts Jesus teaching about God’s eschatological judgment of *the nations*.”¹⁴ What do you think about this interpretation of this text? What does it suggest about the ways we should structure our prison ministry efforts? How might we take part in God’s liberation of those in prison?
- Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber writes that “Christ comes not in the form of those who visit the imprisoned but in the imprisoned being cared for.”¹⁵ If we read this text as a statement about Jesus’ identification with those in prison, what does it tell us about the character of God and the nature of God’s new creation in the last days?

¹⁴ *The Fall of the Prison*, 118.

¹⁵ *Accidental Saints* (Convergent Books, 2015), 47.