

that *our* sins weren't really *that* bad? Those verses above don't separate the really bad sins from the not so bad sins — it says “*all* have sinned.”

The ability to show our gratitude for the gift of salvation to those around us may be the only way some will ever know the freedom of being in Christ. In Albert's case, he accepted that his life as a *physically* free man was over. He made the choice however to become free in Christ after he was removed from society and made to face his wrong. Yes, Albert is *in* prison, but he is no longer imprisoned — no longer imprisoned because of remorse and guilt. Albert chose to not become reclusive and introverted because of his knowledge of his own wrongful deeds. He chose instead to use his experience as a tool to reach others.

Civilized societies have a great disdain for those who are sent to prison for crimes as serious as Albert's. While there are a few exceptions, it's not unusual for the victims or families of victims of such serious crimes to express a feeling of justification when the one who committed the offense against them or their loved one is removed from society. The victims experiences a feeling of vindication. They enjoy the knowledge that the offender will never be free to “do that” to anyone else. While it was certainly appropriate and just for Albert to have been removed from society, it was — at the same time — his ticket to freedom in Christ that he might never have gotten had it not been for his most grievous sins.

There are many people around each one of us that are imprisoned by sin. They need freedom just as much as Albert needed freedom — freedom from the guilt of such a horrible sin. Do we see ourselves as fellow prisoners of sin — from which there is no release or do we see ourselves as appreciative sinners who have been freed from the punishment of sin by the blood of Christ? Albert came to the realization while in prison that the souls of *many* others rested in *his* ability to “free” them as he had been freed. Have we come to that same realization or are we content to leave those around us behind the bars of eternal damnation? The souls of *many* prisoners rest in our hands. The Gospel is their key to freedom and we *hold* that key in our hands. Let them *know* about the key — give them the opportunity to *know* that there is freedom in Christ — no matter what the sin — or its consequence.

“To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.’ They answered him, ‘We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?’ Jesus replied, ‘I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”
(John 8:31-36 NIV-1984)

*“Diligence” is a privately funded publication of:
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DILIGENCE

“We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” — Hebrews 6:11

A ministry of Dennis and Sherri Owens

Volume 11

April 1, 2012

Issue 5

The Key to Freedom

Albert sat in a cold cell with three walls and no windows. The only opening had steel bars blocking any escape. He stared in disbelief. The words he had heard still pounded through his head —

“Albert Lee ___ ___ Jr., will you please stand and face the jury.... We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of Aggravated Murder as charged on count 1.... We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of Kidnapping and Extortion as charged on counts 2 and 3 respectively Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is this your unanimous verdict? Yes, your Honor. Having heard the verdict of this jury, the court will pronounce sentence on the 22nd day of March. Court is adjourned.”

No sooner had this memory ran through his head before another memory flashed in its place.

On the 22nd day of March, the Judge called the court to order and began to speak concerning the charges for which Albert had been found guilty. The final words of Judge Phillips echoed through his memory.

“Albert Lee ___ ___ Jr., through the authority granted me by the state of Ohio and for the crimes of which you have been found guilty, I pronounce a sentence of life in prison without parole.”

At age 39 and in good health, Albert faced a future of confinement, away from civilian population. His only companions would be those of like background and the guards whose duty it would be to keep him confined.

Although he had the rest of his life to do not much more than think, his mind rushed back in time trying to recall how it was that he now found himself in such a situation as this. As he reviewed the past, he recalled the fact that since the age of fourteen he had been incarcerated numerous times for petty crimes. He was always at the heart of some sort of illegal activity. His rap sheet was as long as his arm. He asked himself, “Was I born bad? Did God chose some people to do wrong while He blessed others with a life of doing right?” There would be more than ample time for Albert to ponder those questions — he was going to have a lifetime to do so.

The above story is true. It's the sad and unfortunate story of an individual known to me as the result of a jail ministry in which I was involved many years ago. Albert is now 76 years old and is currently incarcerated at the Hocking Correctional Facility in Nelsonville, Ohio.

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For most of us who are reading this, it's difficult to relate to Albert and this story of his life. But there is more to the story. Albert spent a long time in the *county* jail before being moved to a federal prison. During that time in the county jail, he began to accept the reality of his crimes and the resulting penalty. More importantly, *because* of his acknowledgement of the crimes he had committed — not only against society but also against God — he sought forgiveness. In an effort to come to a point of reconciliation with God, he took numerous correspondence courses provided by that local jail ministry. He slowly but eventually learned that although his life of freedom on earth had ended, he could look forward to an eternity with God washed clean of his sins. After *many* months of study, Al accepted Christ and was baptized for the remission of his sins.

Although I am *often* skeptical of jailhouse conversions, I believe Albert accepted Christ and did in fact move in a new direction with his life such as it was. He was moved from isolation to a range with 5-7 cells that shared a common exercise area. Because of his behavior, Albert became a trustee and was given greater privileges as well as a bit more freedom within the confines of that jail. He became a serious promoter of the Gospel and was responsible for the enrollment of *many* other inmates in the correspondence courses in which he had first began his *own* studies. That ministry grew to such a point that the Warden allowed a portable baptistery to be left at the jail in order to accommodate the baptisms that followed — and there were many.

Albert exceeded the material that was available in all of the courses we had to offer and was allowed to enroll in college level courses through the prison system. I have no idea whether or not Albert continued to study and reach out to those to whom he had access. I can only hope and pray that he *did* continue to grow in knowledge as well as in faithfulness and continued his outreach to others who found themselves in the same situation as himself.

As Albert began to accept that his crimes against humanity were *so* severe that it had been *necessary* to remove him from normal society for the rest of his life, he also began to realize that those who had been the victims of his crimes were no longer on this earth, so no chance existed to express *any* form of sorrow or regret to those whom he had offended. His only hope was in God through Christ. There was no hope for reconciliation or forgiveness on earth.

What does this story have to do with us? We're not convicted of crimes that would separate *us* from society. We're good upstanding citizens who live within acceptable social limits. We believe in God and worship him regularly. We have good relationships with families and friends. So where is the common thread?

To a much lesser degree, many individuals today find themselves in a situation similar to Albert's. The ability to go back through time and reconstruct relationships that have been broken or reconcile friendships that have been destroyed is often met with numerous physical limitations. Those who have been hurt or damaged

in some way may have moved on with their own life and would have no desire to revisit difficult or painful experience just to — from their point of view — relieve the conscience of the offender. Reflecting with regret, on wrongs we have done may fill our hearts with feelings of remorse and guilt — feelings that can cause us to place ourselves in our own cold cell — a cell of feeling separated from God. Knowledge about our *own* misgivings will often cause us to become reclusive and introverted. We may fear that others will find out the “real truth” about us. We should however — like Albert — lay hold of the freedom that we can obtain through forgiveness in Christ. Our own pain about the wrongs we have done can be a valuable tool in reaching out to others who might also be experiencing their own feelings of remorse and guilt.

Each of us has experienced *numerous* events in our lives that have had impact on the lives of those whom we have touched as a result of those events. Each of us can probably recall both fond and not so fond memories. What we do *with* those memories may indeed control the ability we have to impact not only our *current* life but the lives of others with whom we come into contact.

It's unlikely that we have done anything as drastic as Albert. But is severity the measure of our wrongs? Is the harm *we* have done to others and/or ourselves any less *real* than the harm Al did to *his* victims? Albert's incarceration was a *constant* reminder of just how wrong his actions had been. The consequence of his wrongs were physical *as well as* emotional. Aren't there however, almost always consequences as a result of *our* actions — constantly reminding *us* of our misdeeds? Consider what scripture says in Romans 3:20-26

“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” (Rom. 3:20-26 NIV-1984)

These verses above state that “...*all* have sinned.” Obviously murder, kidnapping and extortion are very serious offenses in society. Yet, the Gospel tells us that *all* have sinned — and that *all* can receive forgiveness. So is reconciliation with God through the blood of Christ *less* precious for those who see *their* sin as less an offense to God? Should the gratitude shown in *our* lives by *sharing* the forgiveness available through acceptance of the Gospel be *less* because we perceive