

by Doug Tjapkes

One week of daily devotions designed to center your thoughts on persons in prison and persons with family members in prison



In Memory of the late Maurice Carter

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Foreword

One of the most famous recruiting posters of all time simply said: *“Uncle Sam Wants YOU!”* The United States Army wanted recruits. No matter where you walked in front of the poster, Uncle Sam’s finger pointed at you and his burning eyes stared at you.

I’m thinking of that now, as you prepare to read this unusual one week series of devotions. I hope to convince you that God wants you to get involved.

Don’t make elaborate plans as to what you’re going to do and how you’re going to do it. I made that mistake. I contacted an innocent man in prison and explained all that I could do for him. I dug in with a lot of energy and a lot of confidence. Yet nothing seemed to work. In less than a year he suggested we part ways. I was flabbergasted. Not only was I ineffective, I wasn’t wanted! But there is a purpose in everything. That prisoner is the man who introduced me to the late Maurice Carter. I met Maurice and promised nothing. Then God took over, and the incredible drama that developed over the next ten years could never have been predicted or scripted. It not only changed Maurice’s life, it changed mine!

God may do the same for you. Don’t decide all the little details. Just decide.

Blessings!

The word "INNOCENT!" is written in a bold, white, 3D-style font with a slight shadow, set against a dark gray rectangular background. The letters are blocky and have a metallic or plastic-like appearance.

Day One

Suggested Bible Reading: Matthew 25:31-46

*Then the king will say to those on his right,
...I was in prison and you came to visit me.*

Matthew 25:34, 36

The very fact that you're reading this meditation means that you have some interest in the subject of prisons. Perhaps God has ordained that you read this meditation so that you *will* take an interest in the subject.

There are more than 2 million people behind bars in our country! That's a pretty huge mission field! If you don't want to wait until Judgment Day to debate your prison visits with the Maker, it's time to get moving.

If you know of someone in prison, here are ways that Jesus will give you credit for a visit:

1. Visit the prisoner (not just once!).
2. Visit the prisoner's spouse (not just once!).
3. Do something special for the prisoner's family.
4. Remember little things like greeting cards for birthdays.
5. Remember the prisoner and family at lonely holiday times.
6. Be generous!

Don't expect any reward or thanks, other than these words: *I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of those brothers of mine, you did for me.*

Prayer

Our prayer, O Lord, is not only for the people behind bars, but for the spouses and sons and daughters who today are trying to hold up their heads in dignity, are trying to make ends meet, and are trying to find the many answers to "why?" Help us find ways to reach out. We pray in the name of him who came to free all of us. Amen.

Day Two

Suggested Bible Reading: Proverbs 28:1-10

Evil men do not understand justice.

Proverbs 28:5

One of the first things you must do as you prepare to work in this challenging mission field is to put aside one of our old Christian suppositions, i.e, the good guys are in the judicial system and the bad guys are in prison.

Pertinent reading for this venture is *Actual Innocence*, a disturbing yet revealing book written by Barry Scheck, Peter Neufeld and Jim Dwyer. After you read this, it's important to remember that not all cops and prosecutors are unworthy of the positions they hold. However, it is a known fact that a number of irresponsible people are in the judicial system, and there are many innocent people unjustly locked away in prisons.

From now on your job is not to judge. God will take care of that. We've got prisoners and their families to care for and imperfect judicial and prison systems to deal with. Your challenge is to walk in a field that is, frankly, quite muddy and unpleasant. In Christ's Name, take a stand, roll up your sleeves and get to work. It won't be easy.

The last half of today's verse says, "But those who seek the Lord understand (justice) fully."

Prayer

Lord, we ask your blessing on your servants laboring in the judicial system, your children lodged in correctional facilities, and on me as I hope to make a difference in someone's life. We pray in the name of him who said "I come to proclaim freedom for the prisoners." Amen.

Day Three

Suggested Bible Reading: Genesis 39:6-23

When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger. Joseph's master took him and put him in prison...

Genesis 39:19-20

Nothing could be more frustrating than to be imprisoned for a crime you did not commit. Maurice Carter spent 29 years of a life sentence in prison for an assault committed by someone else. Rob Warden, Executive Director of the Center on Wrongful Conviction at Northwestern University's Law School says that by conservative estimates 100,000 innocent people are behind bars. His personal feeling is that the number is probably closer to 200,000!

Chances are this is the first time you ever heard this figure. Now that you have this information, the question to you as a committed Christian is, what are you going to do about it? A wise person once said, "As long as one innocent person is in prison, I am not free!"

Just as in mission work, why not start one at a time? The organization publishing this booklet can help you. It's no secret that our Lord hated injustice. As his followers we are obligated to get involved.

Prayer

Lord of justice, help us to fight injustice so that innocent people may be freed, and reunited with families and friends. We pray in the name of him about whom it was said, "he will proclaim justice to the nations." Amen

Day Four

Suggested Bible Reading: John 8:1-11

If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.

John 8:7

It wasn't the uneducated or pagan public that brought that woman before Jesus. These were teachers and church leaders who made quick reference to the Laws of Moses after allegedly catching her in the act of adultery.

Isn't it amazing that many church leaders today who so boldly state their belief in the sanctity of life limit their discussion to the abortion issue? More and more of those same people are finally becoming vocal in supporting abolition of the death penalty. They see that life is sacred at the end, just as in the beginning.

Church leaders were hoping to trick Jesus by quoting some Old Testament laws. After calmly answering the Pharisees with the verse quoted above, he said, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" When she answered in the negative, he said, "Then neither do I."

Besides the fact that the death penalty has failed to serve as a deterrent and that many people on death row have been proven innocent, it is now time for us--on moral grounds--to join most nations in letting God decide when life should end.

Prayer

May we, dear Lord, never assume your role in determining the end of a life. We pray in the name of him who said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." Amen.

Day Five

Suggested Bible Reading: Acts 16:25-34

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.

Acts 16:25

It's amazing how many prisoners keep their chins up during difficult times. Paul and Silas were wrongly accused, beaten and then locked up in stocks used for security and torture. They were probably awake at midnight because of the pain and discomfort. And yet they sang!

Don't expect the prisoner(s) with whom you work to be praying and singing hymns. Maurice Carter was once labeled a "model prisoner," and he quickly corrected the statement. Even though he has done many wonderful things in prison, he pointed out that anger and bitterness had also prompted some unpleasant behavior.

Rubin "Hurricane" Carter was asked when he changed his attitude while in prison. He replied that he looked at himself in a mirror one day and saw hatred in his eyes. "I decided there was enough hatred in the world," he said, "and that if I refused to change, the state would win." Wrongly accused and twice convicted, he is now a warm and compassionate person.

Your contact in prison may not be so lovable. You might find it helpful to read *What's So Amazing About Grace?* by Philip Yancey. Wouldn't it be wonderful if God used you to extend his grace to someone?

Prayer

Lord, help us to remember that only one was perfect, and that you came to save the rest of us. Even though we labor in unpopular areas and risk the loss of reputation, be at our side and bless our efforts. We pray in the name of him who said, "The truth shall set you free." Amen

Day Six

Suggested Bible Reading: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.
2 Corinthians 12:10

It would be an untruth to say that it will be fun for you to get involved in working for or with a prisoner. However, it may be one of the more satisfying things you have done.

In the citizens committee that worked for the release of Maurice Carter, some members were harassed by police, ridiculed by friends and sometimes family, threatened by anonymous callers, and even looked down upon by fellow Christians. For you, the response may be entirely different, but be assured there *will* be reaction to your involvement. You are going to discover and work with segments of society that you didn't know existed. But that isn't all. You will see amazing answers to prayer, meet new friends, find support where you least expect it, and experience absolute awe at God's overall plan! This awareness may come when you find yourself at a very low point.

In our chapter today, Paul said he was told by the Lord, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." The Lord says that to you, also.

Prayer

Lord, in our weakness make us strong. May we be steadfast as we oppose inequality and injustice, because we know these are the things you detest. We pray in the name of him who still conquered, after being wrongly accused, convicted and executed. Amen.

Day Seven

Suggested Bible Reading: Revelation 3:14-22

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! Revelation 3:13

Complacency is a sin.

For a week we've been dealing with topics related to prisons. It is our hope and prayer that, during this week, you learned that:

more than 2 million people are behind bars in our country, and *all of them* have names, feelings, families and friends;

of the more than 2 million, hundreds of thousands are innocent, having been wrongly accused and convicted.

The face of Jesus can be seen in each one of these inmates, and according to Jesus when we minister to just one of them, we minister to him!

It is also our hope and our prayer that you intend to do something about it!

If you choose to get involved in this field, you can anticipate that lives will be changed. Change will come in the lives of the prisoners and their families, as well as in the lives of your family and friends. But the biggest change may come in your own life!

In our Bible passage today, it says, "He who has an ear, let him hear."

Prayer

Lord, we know that there are millions of prisoners, and that hundreds of thousands of them are innocent. We also know that you love all prisoners. Help me to make a difference by befriending just one, or the child of one. We pray in the name of him who said that he came for sinners. Amen.

About The Author



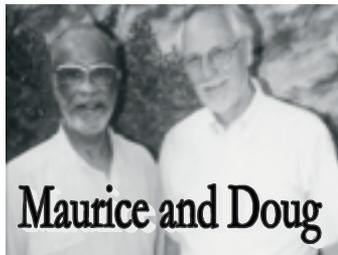
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Doug Tjapkes resided in western Michigan all of his life. He was a radio broadcaster and journalist for the first segment of his working years, and a seller of church organs and director of music for his church for the second segment. He now uses his previous training and experience to crusade for the wrongly convicted, in the final trimester of his career series.

He became acquainted with Maurice Carter in 1995. Maurice was serving a life sentence in the Michigan Correctional system on a charge of assault with intent to murder. His sentence was commuted for medical reasons in July, 2004. He died three months later.

Doug states that the primary purpose of this one-week devotional series is to stimulate interest in prison ministry on a very personal level. "As my relationship with Maurice Carter developed," he said, "it became clear that God wanted more of me than simply to befriend Maurice. Now I must encourage other Christians to get involved. Helpless people, trapped by flaws in the system, are depending on us! The time is now."

Doug and his wife Marcia reside in Spring Lake, Michigan, and are the parents of four grown children.



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Action with Compassion

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