

Gary Wyder
Prison Evangelist

The Florida Prison Evangelist

"...He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners..." Luke 4:18
February, 2017

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LAKE BUTLER CHURCH OF CHRIST

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The Value of the One - Luke 15.10

The account of the demoniac in Mark five is unique in many ways. While there were synagogues in the Decapolis (ten cities), that area was considered the "wrong side of the tracks". The trip begins with danger. In chapter Four, the disciples encounter a life threatening storm. They had to be happy to reach the shore. Immediately they were met by a wild man (Matthew's account says men). He could not be subdued, he broke chains and shackles, he was so fierce and violent that no one even travelled that way. He did not wear clothes and was a self mutilator.

We can only imagine what the disciples were feeling. Should they get back into the boat and head home, even with the possibility of a storm? It is clear that the Lord often takes us out of our comfort zone. It is pretty easy to think that some people, based on their behavior, are beyond helping. This man was demon possessed. I've met those who have willingly given their lives and souls over to Satan and practice witchcraft and have gone over to the "dark side". They hurt themselves and others. They do crazy unbelievable things we hear of in the news. They need to be locked away for their own safety and that of society. Yet, this man ran to Jesus and worshiped him (verse 6). The demons recognize who Jesus is.

Jesus cast out the demons (legion) into the swine. The swine ran over the cliff, for not even they could stand to live with these tormenting creatures. How do the townsfolk react? With joy that the man had been healed? With anger that they lost their swine. No, with fear (verse 15). Why were they afraid? Was it the power they had witnessed? Were they doubtful that the man had really changed? The power of God working in lives scares some people. We see that later in the ministry of Jesus. It is way out of the norm they are accustomed to. The man begs Jesus to go with him. Jesus main message had been, "Follow Me". But in this case, he forbids it (verse 19). Rather, he is told, "tell your friends what great things the Lord has done for you and what compassion He had on you". That is what the man does.

Then Jesus and the disciples leave. They went through a violent storm, to the "wrong side of the tracks", met a crazy man only to leave immediately thereafter? **Jesus came for the one.** We have no more record of the man/men. But, when Jesus comes back to the region, large crowds come to see him. It is clear that this man who was beyond all hope proclaimed the great things the Lord had done for him. **One life radically changed can and will impact many for good.**

That is what I love about prison ministry. We work with those that society has given up on (and I do understand why). Yet, even once in prison, many are only sorry they got caught or sorry for their circumstances, yet are not willing to undertake true change. Few are willing to do these three things.

- 1) Take responsibility for their own behaviors and actions.
 - 2) Be willing to do the hard work of change.
 - 3) Seek the right people and right path to make those changes.
- We are there to work with those few. The same Gospel that "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17.6) has the same impact on this corrupt world. What a radical difference an encounter with Jesus had for this one man in the Decapolis. Jesus wants the same for all.

Frank Parker of Sebring (September, 2016 newsletter) works with men and women at the Highlands County Jail. He teaches eleven classes weekly there and reported 23 baptized in 2016. Most of them are still in jail, but a few that were released are continuing their studies and growth.

Tom Dugan just reported three baptisms at Century CI. Steve Trubey reported three at Hardee CI. James Lee has been able to baptize 27 men and women at the Franklin county jail.

Jim Hall, elder at the Orange Street congregation in Auburndale (March, 2016 newsletter) has baptized 232 at the Polk County Jail. They conduct Bible classes and Anger Management classes.

What impact will these precious souls have on their families and on our society? How many more will come to Christ as they tell others what the Lord has done for them?

The Next "One"?

For the past twelve years, Tom Dugan with the Airport Road congregation in Crestview, FL has run a successful Bible Correspondence Course program. A number of congregations have adopted his administrative procedures and his course curriculum.



One of his students, Michael Westry, took his first course, *There IS a Better Way*, a 5 lesson course from Corpus Christi, TX in May of 2007. Michael was at the Santa Rosa CI facility and after completing the fifth course

requested and was baptized into Christ on March 11, 2008. Mike was transferred to several different facilities in Region One over the next few years but continued to take courses with Tom. He also requested Spiritual Advisor Visits with him wherever he was assigned. Beginning in August 2009, he began the series of lessons written by Fred D. Whitelaw, *Thought Provoking Bible Studies*, which cover each of the New Testament Books from Romans to Jude. Courses have from 8 lessons to 36 lessons.

Mike returned to Century CI from Berrydale Forestry Camp where he completed his forty-fifth Bible Correspondence Course on September 30, 2016. He is the first inmate with Tom to complete this many courses. Along the way, he has enrolled several inmates into the program and is always talking to other inmates about his journey with the Lord.

Mike said when he was told of his accomplishment that he could only thank the Lord. He is continuing his studies and hopes to return to Pensacola upon release to become involved in a congregation there and someday return to work in State prisons teaching what he has learned.

Florida inmates do not have internet access. Many congregations only use the internet for courses. Paper courses are ideal with inmates. Most inmates will take a course through the mail. Many appreciate the communication. If nice certificates are provided at completion of each course it is sometimes the first achievement they have had in their life. Correspondence programs will grow if done properly because the inmates will encourage their friends to enroll.

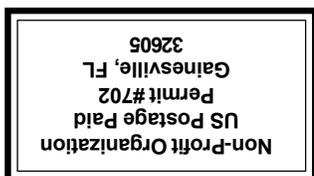
If you are interested in becoming involved with a Bible Correspondence program, you can contact Tom Dugan (trdugan@cox.net) and he will assist you in whatever capacity you wish to become involved. Two precepts are satisfied. Go ye into all the world spreading the gospel (Mark 16.16) and I was in prison and you cared for me. (Matthew 25.36)

First Annual Fundraiser a Tremendous Success!

Sixty six attended our First Annual Fund Raiser on September 15, 2016. Mark Redd, elder at Lake Butler, extolled the value of prison ministry. Retired from the DC and having been both Warden and Regional Director, Mark knows the value of changed lives. Trent Wheeler, minister at Lake Butler, was our planner and coordinator. Shirley Wilder, our church secretary, pulled it all together.

We had 65 contributors and raised \$12,025. We also obtained some monthly contributors. This put 2016 in the black. Gary is contacting congregations and has new monthly commitments from that effort. Thank you to the many who made this a great success. You can donate vehicles. Shop smile.amazon.com, they will donate a percentage to our ministry (designate Lake Butler Church of Christ, Inc).

The 44th Annual National Jail & Prison Ministry Workshop is set for June 14 - 16, 2017 in Metairie, LA. The Theme is **"Renew"**. See www.keepitrealministries.com



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