

The Park Road Pulpit  
*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*  
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



***An Obligation to Make Things Right***  
*Isaiah 49.8-16a; Luke 4.16-22a*  
Russ Dean, May 25, 2008

“Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right.”<sup>1</sup> We know about making things right in our household – not so much in regard to crime, mind you, as to the offenses that come in sibling rivalries and in dealings with friends and family. If you have children you’ve probably also been through that season of “it’s not fair.” In our household these days, every violation of fairness, every instance of injustice, demands the exactitude of justice. An obligation to make things right.

If it is so with child’s play, how much more must we demand this obligation concerning crime? Regarding victims, criminals, and the community at large, we have an obligation to make things right. Today’s sermon is based on a strongly-held conviction that the citizens of the United States of America, and especially we citizens who claim Jesus as Lord, are failing such an obligation in no small measure. I do not believe this is a failure of government, per se. My concern is greater than this. My concern is that “the [current] mood and temper of the [American] public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals,”<sup>2</sup> is a sad reflection on the people we have become, and that is, a people filled with fear and hatred, a people with little patience for understanding, and almost no tolerance for forgiveness. We have become addicted to easy answers, the kind that sound good as long as you don’t think too deeply about them. And

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<sup>1</sup> The following quotation from Howard Zehr was printed in the order of service: “Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions which promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance.” This quotation was taken from a preaching periodical; I have no further information for the citation.

<sup>2</sup> Also printed in the bulletin, was this quotation of Winston Churchill: “The mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country.”

we have become satisfied with expedient so-called solutions that are more geared toward political agendas than actually solving any problems, more geared to soothing public fear than getting the heart of the problem and really making things right

Our decades long “war on crime” has given us only a false sense of security, while bathing many in an aura of self-righteousness. The public attitude seems bolstered by a belief that the more people we punish, the better, righter, holier the rest of us become. The very opposite is the case. Like a school teacher who finds that it is actually her own teaching that comes under judgment if most of her students fail the grade – the morality and righteousness of a nation is called in question, the more of its citizens have to be imprisoned. As my colleague and friend, Dr. Madeline McClenney-Sadler has noted,

“We are ignorant of how and why our culture has outpaced Russia and South Africa in incarcerating its very own citizens. We discuss the sins of criminals from positions of privilege, and we react to crime like a crazed mob. We have less in common with Jesus and more in common with his accusers.”<sup>3</sup>

The conviction of today’s sermon is summarized by those words of Winston Churchill that are printed in your bulletin: “One of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country... is the mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals.” Because our “mood and temper” go a long way in determining policies, my distress is more over our mood and temper than even our distressing policies.

Please note that Churchill did not say the execution of justice is the test of a nation. He said the “mood and temper of the public” is the test of our civilization. You may not leave here today and tell anyone your bleeding heart liberal pastor said we ought to go easy on criminals! You must listen more carefully than that. Crime and punishment is an unfortunate, but necessary

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<sup>3</sup>This is from a “Pastoral Reflection,” by Dr. Madeline McClenney-Sadler, Founder and President of the Exodus Foundation of Charlotte, printed in: “Acts of Faith: Resources for Prophetic Worship,” published by the North Carolina Council of Churches, Lectionary Year A, Part 1, p.39.

component of any society. This side of the *kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6) we will be dependent upon, indebted to, and grateful for those who provide for our protection, whether our local law enforcement agents, or the men and women of the armed services, some of the bravest of whom we memorialize this holiday weekend. But Churchill is right, and I am afraid our “mood and temper” does not reflect well on our civilization as a people.

Consider the following statistics:

Today in this “land of the free,” more than one percent of our total population is incarcerated. This is more in raw numbers and a higher percentage than any other nation in the world. (Land of the free? Who is failing the test of morality and civility?)

Economists at the University of Massachusetts and the Santa Fe Institute estimate that the number of security-related jobs in the U.S. (prison guards, security guards, factory and retail establishments) now represent as much as one-quarter of the U.S. work force, up 47% since 2002.<sup>4</sup> (When the largest employer in a county becomes the Federal Prison, will its citizens be more interested in reducing crime, or just finding the next criminal?)

90% of incarcerated women report incomes of less than \$10,000 in the year before their arrest; 80% of them report making less than \$2,000. (Do you think there may be a connection between their economy and their decision making?)<sup>5</sup>

80% of women in prison are single mothers who lose contact with their children. 50% are convicted of violent crimes – the majority of which are convicted for defending themselves or their children against abuse. Prison sentences are twice as long for killing husbands as for killing wives. (Are women really that much less valuable to us?)

90% of all U.S. prosecutors are white, and nationwide they pursue the death penalty more often if the victim of violence is white. In Georgia, in 70% of cases when the perpetrator was black and the victim white, the prosecutor sought the death penalty. When the perpetrator was white and the victim black, they did so in only 15% of cases.

In Mississippi, though African-Americans make up only 30% of the population, they comprise 70% of all prisoners.

Approximately 80% of all prisoners are nonviolent drug offenders. Whereas it is estimated that only 13% of all monthly drug users are African-American, they account for 70% of all drug-related arrests.

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<sup>4</sup> From a sermon by Ken Sehested, whose source is: “Garrison America,” cited by MSN Money’s Jon Markman.

<sup>5</sup> The remaining statistics are from the Exodus Foundation, whose information cites a 1996 National Criminal Justice Commission report called “The Real War on Crime,” and Prisonactivist.org, “Women in Prison.”

I am saddened and depressed by such statistics, which indicate to me how twisted our sense of justice has become. The numerous recent reports of men and women proven innocent, after sitting behind bars for years, wasting their lives away for crimes they did not commit, is all the proof we need that our system is gravely flawed. And the obvious fact that we, as citizens of this nation will time and again allow our system to send the innocent to their deaths is evidence that we are much more interested in naming a villain than discovering the truth. Our system is more interested in punishment than rehabilitation. Our collective soul is bent on retribution not restoration. Our heart is filled with vengeance, not an obligation to make things right.

Information from the Exodus Foundation states clearly that “there is no evidence that punishment reduces recidivism or the crime rate. We must keep in mind that punishment and justice are not the same concepts.”<sup>6</sup> Our system is built on a heartless notion of punishment: do the crime, serve the time. We as a nation seem content to “lock ‘em up and throw away the key” without ever asking, why. Why, in such a nation as ours, a nation that holds such immense promise, do so many people live lives that are so unfulfilling that they knowingly, willingly throw them away? Why are so many being swept up in a tide of hopelessness that leads to violence?

We can continue to build our prisons. We can continue our blind and unjust obsession with punishment. But such a path will not make us any safer. After all the language in the last few decades of getting “tough on crime,” do you feel any safer today? The recent surge in crime is surely the answer to that question. Our current system will not make us safer, and following such a path will not lead us in the way of restoration. We are losing our civilization – and those

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<sup>6</sup> There was no specific citation for this claim, though I have read of specific studies that have produced this conclusion. The truth of the statement, however, seems manifestly obvious. Our “tough on crime” stance is hardly curbing the violence in our society, is it? Our policies are no doubt “tough on criminals,” but the evidence seems clear that they are failing to make any significant reduction in crime itself. We, literally, cannot get new prisons built fast enough. Tough on crime?

who follow in that *more excellent way* (1 Corinthians 13), which the Apostle Paul spoke of, need to take a stand.

One word about the scriptures: neither of today's texts, nor any others you may find within the pages of your Bible, are admonitions to open the doors of the prisons so the murderers and sex-offenders can just walk out scott-free. Biblical justice takes seriously the reality of evil, and you will not have to look far to find support for a tough on crime approach. *An eye for an eye...* (Exodus 21) But Jesus said, "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye...' I say to you, turn the other cheek* (Matthew 5). Jesus' way is about relationships. Making right our relationships by having the compassion to know our enemies as our friends (Matthew 5), to *walk the extra mile* with the outsider (Matthew 5), to do for *the least of these* (Matthew 25).

The mood and temper of the American public seems to have no stomach for such. We want a one-size fits all criminal justice system of "three strikes" and mandatory sentencing, and we want it without daring to ask if maybe we, in some way, are a part of the problem. Our approach demonizes and dehumanizes all criminals, for it's easier to incarcerate "monsters" than children. But Rev. Nancy Hastings Sehested, a Baptist minister now serving as a North Carolina prison chaplain says:

Behind every "issue" are real people, and of course this [issue] is like so many issues: complex, and filled with class and racial inequities. Our prison system in this country does not have the vivid torture of Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo, but we are killing people more slowly, through a system of daily shame and humiliation. As one correctional officer said to me recently, "I am a worse human being since I started working here. And prison isn't helping these guys either. They are just learning more and more about how to be worse and worse."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nancy, whose stories are both chilling and heartbreaking, sent these words in an email as I was preparing for this sermon.

We are all worse human beings because of a correctional system that is not designed to truly make things right. Without knowing it, we have imprisoned an entire nation. The aim of biblical justice is to set us all free. Free from fear. Free from prejudice. Free from the desire to seek revenge. Free to seek restoration.

“One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, ‘My son, the battle is between two “wolves” inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.’ The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, ‘Which wolf wins?’ The old Cherokee simply replied, ‘The one you feed.’”<sup>8</sup>

We are feeding the wrong wolf. And if we do not change, it will destroy us.

This may be the most difficult sermon I have ever tried to write. It is difficult because it is an important and complex issue. I think our system is wrong-headed, and is an indicator of a larger, much deeper problem within the American culture. This is not about looking the other way so criminals can go free; it is about looking into the eye of the problem, even if we may find ourselves within it. It is about a culture and a system which is still almost hopelessly racist in its execution of justice. What would we do if one in nine young white men were in the system?<sup>9</sup> First, let us concede that this would never

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<sup>8</sup> From Jim Wallis’s book, *The Great Awakening*, p.267.

<sup>9</sup> The numbers from the African-American community are staggering. The Exodus Foundation indicates, “In the early nineties in Baltimore, 56% of all African American men ages 18-34 were under some form of criminal justice supervision on any given day.” I am not taking issue with criminal conduct (if these men, in fact, committed crimes they deserved to be punished). I am calling attention to the tragedy and the travesty of such a desperate situation in this nation – the fact that 56% of any population could become criminal is unacceptable for such a fortunate nation.

happen with the children of the majority – because we look out for our own. But, if the problem headed in that direction, we would find the root causes of the problems. And we would apply time and money to a real solution. We are choosing not to do that in this case because, if I may be so blunt, African-American males are still expendable in this society. But God loves them, and Jesus would have us find a way to show that love.

This is a real problem. And we need real solutions. I firmly believe the followers of Jesus can offer real solutions. They will be found not first in policy changes, but in attitude adjustments – our mood and temper. You often ask, as we deal with such topics, “So what we can do?” Here’s what you can do:

1) Be aware of the problem. Read. Educate yourself. Be open to hearing all the stories, all sides of the issue, not just the ones you like.

2) This is a complex issue. Put out of your mind any simplistic solutions. If the answer to the problem will fit on a bumper sticker, it’s probably not an answer.<sup>10</sup>

Remember that there are real people involved. Mothers. Fathers. Children.

3) Get to know the problem. Join me next Saturday as we participate with the Exodus Foundation in a welcome home celebration for incarcerated African-American. They need to know the community has not discarded them. A study in New York City in 2005 showed that black men with criminal records are significantly less likely to be called for a job interview than white ex-convicts. That report concludes that helping ex-

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(Let me note, however, that what we designate as “criminal” may also have a racial component. 80% of criminals are non-violent drug abusers, and the majority of these are African-American. Are these people “criminal” or are they ill? Is prison the best place for a first charge for cocaine possession? Why not in a treatment facility? Which place would be more likely to bring restoration (to the community as well as the offender), and which is more likely to produce a person who is more likely to become a violent felon in the future? If the white population had been decimated in such a way, would we be “treating” our children in prison, or in some kind of rehabilitation facilities?

<sup>10</sup> Historian Jacob Burckhardt puts it this way: “Beware the terrible simplifiers.”

convicts find gainful employment is “every bit as important as putting more police officers on the street.”<sup>11</sup> This is the work of the Exodus Foundation.) Carol Palmer says “Restorative justice puts a human face on the handling of crime and violence. Rather than being purely punitive in approach, restorative justice involves the entire community.” Join me next Saturday.

4) Many of the problems which lead to the desperate situations which result in poor choices and violence are related to poverty. Who do you know that is poor? Really poor? Get involved in a ministry that will give you a chance to understand life from that side of the street. I am convinced that if more of us understood what it meant to be poor, we would be more compassionate. And more compassion would take us a long way in solving so many of our social problems.

Be aware. Seek real solutions, for yourself, and from your government. Put a face on the issue so you can become part of the solution yourself.

We have an obligation to make things right. An obligation to little Mattie Kellett and to the children who grow up on Tuckaseegee Road and Freedom Drive.<sup>12</sup> An obligation to the victims of crime, that we are seeking a solution that will prevent others from suffering as they have. We have an obligation to offenders, that we will seek only just sentences; an obligation to God that our systems will seek to make all people whole. We have an obligation to the community that we will be a part of a kingdom of God that is becoming a reality even here.

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<sup>11</sup> “Race a Factor in Job Offers for Ex-Convicts,” by Paul von Zielbauer, “The New York Times,” June 17, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> There was a Parent/Child dedication for Mattie at the first of our worship service. Following the sermon Greg Jarrell from Hyaets Ministry offered the congregation an opportunity to participate in their ministry in a predominantly poor African-American community, which is located near Tuckaseegee Road and Freedom Drive.

This is a dark and heavy issue, but Jesus' work was a work of great joy. Setting prisoners free ought to be our celebration – not clanging shut one more prison door. We have an obligation to make things right. It should give us joy.

May it be so!