

Headed Into Prison: Going in With Sex Charges

Eighteen years ago, I never considered that I would be arrested and sent to prison. Prison was a place for those other people—the ones who killed, robbed, or seriously dealt in drugs. The attitude I had of someone in prison was pretty much more one of “He had it coming” than any position of compassion. In other words, I was more than a little self-righteous in my attitude toward felons.

My attitude changed, however, the day I sexually abused a 15-year old boy. After that happened, I’d see a newspaper carrying an article with the headline “Local man arrested for sexual assault” and I’d experience a wave of fear. “That could be me,” were the words I thought but didn’t say aloud. One day, however, the headline said “Band director arrested” and the name listed in the article was my own.

Sentenced a year later, I initially spent time in a county jail but was eventually transported to a state-processing center. When the door shut with that metallic sound I wondered if I would survive the experience. I had heard from more than one person in county jail that child molesters are not exactly safe in most prisons. Would I be?

As I shared earlier, that was eighteen years ago. Compared to many being sentenced for sexual offenses these days, my own sentence might seem pretty short (5 years and 10 year probation), but I was not in control of the sentencing. It was the norm in 1985 for first-time offenders.

The newsletters I write go into over 400 institutions around the country and result in a lot of mail. Men and women write me with the same questions I carefully asked others when I was in prison, so when Bro. Dave asked if I would write about entering prison as a sex offender, it seemed a project worth doing. My only hesitation is based on a fear that anyone reading this article might be looking for my comments to fit *every* situation. They won’t. But I am praying that what I share will be received with openness to the possibilities expressed.

“What are you in for?”

I was told never to ask anyone why he was in prison. I was told to do my own time and let others do theirs. The reality is, however, that the question *will* be asked of someone new. The way the question is answered is as important as the answer itself.

I learned quickly in the county jail that most everyone in the cellblock already knew my offense. They read newspapers and saw the news on the unit TV, so I really didn’t have a secret. The prison grapevine in most institutions is better than staff email and usually just as quick or quicker. Again, there might be some who didn’t know but many did.

If the question was a simple “What are you in for?” I would either respond with “I’d rather not share that” or “Why? What have you heard?” On a few occasions, my first answer was accepted but more often than not the followup comment would be something like, “I heard you were a baby raper (or words to that effect).”

If it was clear the person already knew, I didn’t lie or get in his face for attempting to spread rumors. Actually, what I said was something like “Yes and I can’t believe that I could have done such a thing. I am only hoping to learn enough in treatment so that I never harm another child. So many have been hurt by my actions.”

The bottom line in the manner in which I answered was that the truth was the truth and it was not shared with arrogance. I suppose I could have been beaten up or worse, but other than being verbally abused on several occasions and pushed a few times, nothing more serious happened. I know serious things *do* happen to molesters, so I pray for every man that writes as well as for every offender I read about in the paper.

Some offenders have shared with me that they have invented stories for being in prison—making up a crime that they felt others would believe. I only hope that those who do invent a crime for themselves can keep the story in place. In the end, however, offenders will do what they feel they have to do.

Personal Property

More than one man has written to me telling me that someone went through his footlocker and found his court papers and/or letters from individuals or ministries like mine that openly discuss child molestation. In most cases, a general panic was being felt because the individual had told everyone about his drug habit and now someone knew the real story.

A man who writes me often shared that he keeps absolutely nothing in his footlocker that would expose his offense. He mails out or destroys letters from me rather than take a chance on someone going through his things. If secrecy is critical, then safeguards against disclosure should be in place.

Before leaving this topic, I believe an offender should be cautious when moving into a new unit or cell. Getting a sense of the others in the unit before sending for materials makes sense. Another option is to ask the chaplain's opinion. Certainly, this is an area over which prayer would be a good thing.

Too Trusting

By the time many offenders enter prison, family, friends, and even churches have rejected them. Alone and despairing, the first individual willing to listen is like finding water in the desert—all of the pain and confusion comes pouring out. For a few days, meals are taken together; they attend the same chapel services or play on the same team. But when the first conflict between them occurs, one of them is telling others some of the intimate secrets shared in those moments of despair.

An offender entering prison would be best served by remaining quiet for a time. If personal things come up in conversation, weigh the possibility of everyone knowing about them against passing the opportunity to share in that conversation until the discussion topics are more general.

Self Help

I found a great deal of support by participating in chapel activities because my life always had a connection to spirituality. While I definitely did not live as I should have lived, that is not the same as saying I didn't know how I was *supposed* to live.

One prison counselor I greatly respect challenges those who claim a spiritual belief system to live the set of beliefs they hold. He tells them to read and study material related to their faith and to be consistent in their efforts.

Institutional treatment (an SOT or SOTP group) is unlikely until the last year or two of an offender's sentence. The reason is simple: there are just so many group facilitators able to work with an ever-growing number of offenders in a given institution. Given that reality, I concentrated on general aspects of my life (pride, addictive behaviors, etc.) through books from the prison or chapel library as well as through Bible

studies. At one point, I realized that most everyone knew of my offense so I started to write ministries I heard about. They often sent me newsletters or book recommendations and when I could afford to do so, I did purchase things.

In this instance, the issue of what was in my personal property had been set aside in favor of using my prison time to get help. I soon learned, though, that other inmates saw mail coming to me before I did. A newsletter I regularly received was called “Love in Action” and more than one inmate wanted to get on the mailing list for that until I told them it was a self-help group for overcoming sexually addictive behavior. They usually groaned and walked away.

Given time, I did find others who were sex offenders and who like myself wanted to work on changing their lives. We often used Bible studies to help us focus on specific attitudes that needed attention, believing that if you fix one part of yourself, other parts of you will benefit. We shared in generic terms (no details), prayed for one another, and encouraged each other to be faithful in our daily living. Some of the most incredible men I have ever met could be found in these varying groups of men.

A therapist I saw before entering prison suggested yet another approach to self-help. He suggested that I write letters and mail them to someone who would be willing to save them for me. The letters were divided into “how are you doing” segments to the person I was writing and “this is how I am feeling and what I am learning” segments meant to be more of a journal. I still have a large box containing all of those letters. One day I hope to read them again for a better sense of just how much I actually have changed.

One Day at a Time

While in county jail, a man who had been in prison before spent time telling me not to look at years or even months to serve. He said each day should be everything good you can make it. He also told me that I might hate prison but I would never again have as much time to work on personal issues. He was right.

Despair comes easily if you allow it the room to grow. Hope is much better even if it takes a beating every now and then when the system seems to work against any positive thought. Most importantly, I believe you should see yourself as an individual walking in the light and not in the dark. Prison can be a very dark place, but every inmate has the potential to create light in his or her little piece of that prison. It takes effort but it will be effort well worth it.

I will close by sharing a note I received shortly after I was arrested. The note came from a well respected individual in our city and simply said: “Other well-known individuals in this city have been where you are and have not only survived but have grown stronger. You will, too.” And to that I add, you will as well.