

GUILT AND FORGIVENESS

Associate Mission Partner Gillian Pegler works for Time For Change Ministries and is a Prison Chaplain. She has written the 'Guilt and Forgiveness Course' for use in prisons, and explains here how it works...

Guilt and forgiveness are huge issues for prisoners. Just like the rest of us, prisoners often don't know how to forgive themselves or other people and they sometimes think that God simply can't forgive them because they're too bad. With such an understanding of the depth of their sin, being in prison can be a great time for someone to hear the gospel.

Prisoners are responding to the gospel through the *Time For Change* 'Guilt and Forgiveness Course'. They are being set free from burdens of guilt and shame as they respond in repentance and faith to God's offer of free forgiveness. The 'Guilt and Forgiveness Course' was written specifically for the prison context and takes into account issues that many prisoners face – mental illness, poor reading ability, emotional vulnerability, crushing guilt and the nature of the prison environment. It is careful to affirm that we remain responsible for our crimes even when we have been forgiven for them and that our victims may still be suffering the consequences of what was done.

The course includes the biblical account of King David who learnt about guilt and forgiveness from personal failure and tragedy. A clear gospel presentation is followed by studying David's actions and his prayers of repentance (Psalms 32 and 51) from which we see that he was wonderfully forgiven by God.

As part of the course we also think about the differences between being sorry and being repentant. We can be **sorry** that we did something bad or are suffering because we did something bad or got caught because we did something bad but this is not repentance. By definition, **repentance** involves a change of mind. Biblical repentance is being sorry before God and recognising the depth of our offence against him. Although we may mess up again, when we repent we honestly desire to change and walk away from past sin.

It's important to make such a distinction. Repenting of sin is not top of the secular agenda but we can't let that control our presentation of the gospel, whatever the context. Sin is an offence before God and it separates us from him. That broken relationship with God is our biggest problem and it will continue into eternity unless we repent and trust in Jesus' death to pay for our sins. We are simply not presenting the gospel if we miss out sin and repentance.

British prisoners who have done the Guilt and Forgiveness Course have said:



'I don't feel so weighed down as I did.'

'It's helped me deal with the way I have been judging others.'

'The shredder exercise was a turning point – it was very therapeutic.'

'My thought patterns and behaviour have changed.'

When we are forgiven by God, he chooses not to remember our sins, so we don't need to carry the burden of them in guilt. However, we do need to remember our actions with **remorse**, which is keeping in touch with the reality of what we did and to acknowledge that we are responsible for what we did and the suffering we caused. And we must recognise that prisoners who are forgiven by God still have a debt to pay to society because of what they did.

The simple definition of forgiveness used on the course is 'letting it go and moving on'. At the start of the course we each share how guilty we feel on a scale of 0 (no guilt at all) to 10 (crushing guilt) and we repeat the exercise in the last session. Consistently those numbers are around 7-10 on day one and 4-7 on the final day, so we know that participants have a changed perspective at the end of the course even though it's been very hard for them as they've faced up to what they've done and to the consequences of their actions. We write down the one thing that we feel most guilty about and shred it – this does not achieve forgiveness but it does make us take the step of admitting what we've done and that we do feel guilty about it. This can be a powerful exercise.

Lives are being changed as prisoners repent and believe in the good news of Jesus Christ. The burden of guilt is being lifted and prisoners are finding that they are able to start to forgive themselves and others and are enabled to move on with their lives. Being in prison really can be a time for change.

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The *Time For Change Guilt and Forgiveness course* is available from gillian@tfcministries.org.uk for £22 +p&p. More info at www.tfcministries.org.uk/resources/courses

You can read more about Gillian at www.crosslinks.org/mission-partners/gillian-pegler