

BIG IDEA

Conversations can help us understand the many facets of a tough topic.

SCRIPTURE

Matthew 25:31-46; Hebrews 13:3; Psalm 107: 10-16

GUIDELINES FOR ENTERING INTO DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

- Am I in this conversation to be right (confirmed) or to discover the truth?
- Are we in this conversation to understand or to be understood?
- Am I coming into this conversation to connect or to persuade?

A FEW POINTS TO CONSIDER

Christianity is predicated on the belief that we are all saved by grace alone through faith - not our merit. Therefore, should not the grace that was first extended to us - despite our relational violations - inform how we respond to our neighbors when they violate relationships?

When we define people by what they have done - particularly the worst thing they have ever done - we dehumanize them. Imagine what it would feel like for everyone to not only know the most frightening skeleton in your closet but to also be forever defined and identified by it. As Bryan Stevenson says, "Each of us is more than the worst thing we have ever done." The scarlet letter of "felon" and "ex-con" we engrave on returning citizens stigmatizes, restricts, and shames them for the rest of their lives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

By the second century, Christians were known for their care for the imprisoned. Some philosophers regarded visiting those who were in prison as a virtue, although Palestinian Judaism was largely silent on the issue, compared to its emphasis on visiting the sick or helping the economically oppressed (except in the sense of Jews captured or enslaved by pagans). "The prisoners" probably refers to some Christians imprisoned for their faith or for practices related to it (as in 13:23). Roman law used prison as detention until punishment rather than as punishment itself; sometimes prisoners had to depend on outside allies for food. (Craig Keener, IVP Bible Background Commentary)

COMMENTARY ON MATTHEW 25

Justice is one of the most profound longings of the human race. If there is no justice, then deep within ourselves we know that something is out of joint. Justice is hard to define and harder still to put into practice; but that has never stopped human beings and societies seeking it, praying for it, and working to find ways of doing it better. And 'justice' doesn't simply mean 'punishing wickedness', though that is regularly involved. It means bringing the world back into balance.

Central to the Jewish and Christian traditions (and some others; but these are the ones we're concerned with here) is the belief that this passionate longing for justice comes from the creator God himself. Jews and Christians believe that he will eventually do justice on a worldwide scale, in a way that the International Court can only dream of. God's judgment will be seen to be just. The world will be put to rights. (N.T. Wright, Matthew for Everyone)