

JUSTICE, JUDGMENT AND JAILS

Summary of main points

New Zealand has one of the highest rates of imprisonment in the world – and the cost to us as taxpayers is huge.

Churches can play a part in caring for prisoners (as encouraged by Matthew 25).

Biblical responses to criminal behaviour include restitution, redemption, reconciliation and forgiveness.

Prisoners are mainly men of Māori or European ethnicity aged between 20 and 35.

75 percent of prisoners have no educational qualifications above Year 11 (Form 5).

More than half of prisoners have a mental illness or personality disorder, or have drug or alcohol addictions.

Drug and alcohol rehabilitation programmes are available only to a small percentage of inmates.

Opportunities to learn new skills in prison have reduced over recent years.

The Prime Minister has said that some people turn to crime because they are ‘poorly-equipped to live law-abiding lives’.

New Zealand makes less use of alternatives to prison – like fines, conditional/deferred sentences, community service – than many other countries.

Much ‘victim support’ work in New Zealand is voluntary.

Restorative justice programmes have been proven to help both victims and offenders.

Research has consistently shown that punishment is ineffective in changing human behaviour.

66 percent of the 9,000 prisoners currently released every year in New Zealand will be re-convicted and re-imprisoned within four years.

There are huge political challenges in bringing about significant change to our criminal policy.

The media often report crime in sensational ways and sometimes take a moralistic stance towards alleged offenders.

Much less space is devoted in the media to reflective analysis of issues relating to crime than to reporting crime itself.

The message of the gospels challenges much ‘received wisdom’ about crime and criminals.

Questions to consider

1. How can we account for imprisonment going *up* in New Zealand and crime going *down*?
2. Should we be worried about our high imprisonment rate?
3. How useful are the biblical categories of restitution, redemption, reconciliation and forgiveness in terms of the how we think about dealing with criminal behaviour today?
4. Should we see prisons as primarily places where society 'gets its own back' – or can they be places where redemption can occur?
5. What type of people are in our prisons? Is prison the best place for them?
6. Are we doing enough to help reintegrate prisoners into society? Is that important?
7. How can your church get involved in helping prisoners? Should it get involved in this kind of work? Is it part of a church's 'ministry'?
8. Would you like to see New Zealand making more use of alternatives to prison – like fines, conditional or deferred sentences and community service?
9. What do you think is the purpose of imprisonment?
10. Do you think imprisoning offenders makes our society safer?
11. Do you think we do enough in New Zealand to support victims of crime?
12. What could your church do to help people whose lives have been affected by criminal behaviour?
13. Can people be 'equipped' to avoid getting into crime?
14. What do you see as the 'pros' and 'cons' of restorative justice? Do you think such a process can help offenders and victims put their lives back together after a criminal event?
15. Why do you think punishment is so ineffective in changing human behaviour?
16. Do you think that placing a greater emphasis on the factors that contribute to (particularly young) people getting into crime would make a difference to our crime and incarceration rates?
17. Can we, as a society, really tackle this problem – or is it just too huge? What would it take to achieve significant change? How should our politicians best respond to the challenge?
18. What role do you think the media play in shaping our attitudes to issues around crime and penal policy?
19. How useful is the Bible in helping us to think through issues of crime and responses to it today?
20. Is it realistic to think that 'biblical values' can be reflected in public policy relating to an area like crime and punishment?