



Serving the Last, the Least and the Lost

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I've asked my brother and co-laborer, Dr. Brent Sleasman, to guest blog one more time to share about the significant event that happened this past Saturday at the WTS – Marion Correctional Institute campus. I was unable to attend the commencement, but I've had several friends who did attend and they have shared that this was easily in the "top 10" significant spiritual experiences of their lives.



Dr. Brent Sleasman

God is always at work in the margins and I'm so grateful for a seminary that's identifying ways to serve the last, the least and the lost. Every once in a while we get a vivid picture of the kingdom of God breaking through into our reality: "Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven." This is one of those moments.

Christ's Peace,
Lance



Soon after graduating from Winebrenner Theological Seminary in May 1999, I began serving as an associate pastor in a local church congregation. The Senior Pastor gave me this small memento as a reminder that, as Christians, we are called to serve the last, the least and the lost (see Luke 15). Despite losing the shepherd's rod somewhere in one of our many moves, I keep this on my shelf as a reminder that I need to continue to carry out this mandate from Jesus. We need reminders because, too often, we forget about or overlook those who we are called to serve.

Unless we have a family member who is in prison, there probably isn't much thought given to those who are spend their lives (or a large portion of their lives) "behind bars." Last Saturday (September 16, 2017), it was a privilege to watch as eight men incarcerated at the Marion Correctional Institute (MCI) graduated with a *Diploma in Pastoral Training* granted by Winebrenner Theological Seminary.

Over the past four years, this cohort of students have grown in their faith and relationship with Jesus in ways few imagined when the first course was offered in the fall of 2013.

Too often in church settings we become consumed with the politics or economics of an issue and miss the grander view of God's perspective. Perhaps even some of you are already thinking as you read this, "Why should prisoners be given an education?" Or, "Prison is punishment, why are we rewarding them with classes and this opportunity?" For those struggling to pay back your own student debt perhaps you are thinking, "Why should donors give money to support a program when I have to pay for my own education?"

Please understand, these are all important questions to discuss and consider. In fact, I will welcome the opportunity to talk with you personally about any of these. **But, I believe the questions we ask must be placed within the larger context of the example provided for us by Jesus.** And there is no way to avoid the fact that those in prison (along with their families) have equal worth in God's eyes.

Dr. Dave Draper, President Emeritus of Winebrenner Theological Seminary, was originally invited to serve as the "Winebrenner Voice" during the ceremony. Unfortunately, due to some unexpected health concerns, Dave was unable to attend and I had the privilege of stepping in to share the following with family members and prison staff gathered at the event. The following is an excerpt of my comments:

"At Winebrenner Theological Seminary we frequently discuss what it means to 'equip leaders for service in God's kingdom.' We are here today to celebrate what eight men have accomplished and the impact it has had and will have in the kingdom of God through their work in this prison. It is not just about books, papers, tests and presentations, although all of them are part of their journey. I believe it is about changed lives and becoming more fully conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

Inspiration for this program came partly from the success at Louisiana State Prison (Angola), the largest prison in the USA and known at one time as the bloodiest. New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary was asked to offer classes there and the results have been more than impressive. Hundreds educated. Violence down by 72%. At one point they had nearly 150 graduates and the warden began sending them two by two as missionaries to other prisons.

When Dr. Murthy Kola and Dr. Draper dreamed of this program, Winebrenner Seminary had a policy that a student could not attend, if he or she had been incarcerated within the last five years. After much discussion and prayer this policy was eliminated which allowed these men and others to participate in various academic programs.

For me, the Apostle Paul's prison letters have taken on a new meaning as I hear testimonies of how to remain positive in such an environment. We at Winebrenner now think of you in prison as Paul thought of the Philippians from prison. 'Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns' (1:3-6 NLT).

As we think of the future, we are so grateful that God promises you, our dear brothers, will hear these words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant' (Matthew 25:21 NLT)."

One lesson we've learned at Winebrenner as we have completed this cohort at MCI is that you must

be intentional in your efforts to serve the last, the least and the lost. Serving those who are often forgotten about and overlooked doesn't happen on its own. My hope is that this story will serve as an encouragement to you as you work with your local church leaders to better serve those in your community. We are not all called to serve in our local prisons. But, as we see in Luke 15, Jesus places great value on the last, the least and the lost and, therefore, we must do the same.
