

A MESSAGE OF HOPE, comfort and freedom in Jesus Christ

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“Unity” by Kyle Murphy

Over the last couple of months God has repeatedly placed the following word, or concept, on my heart: unity. This is something Jesus prayed about for all of us who call Him Lord. It would be great to say that we, as the body of Christ, are living in unity with one another but in my experience that is unfortunately not usually the case. Just look at the vast number of different denominations and congregations – all calling themselves Christians – that stand exclusively to one another rather than living in unity.

In jail and prison ministry, I see this far too often as well. Contrary to what some might believe, there are actually a great number of us willing to do as Jesus taught in Matthew 25:36 and as Paul exhorted when he wrote to “remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them” (Hebrews 13:3). Unfortunately, we often labor exclusively from one another rather than living and serving in unity.

All this is not to say that we are at odds with each other, but are we truly living up to what Jesus wanted for us – what He prayed for us? Let’s look again at our quarterly scripture verses. Of all the things Jesus could have been praying about on the night before His crucifixion, He chose to pray for us – and for unity within the body. It is interesting to note that Jesus did not pray for our health, comfort or happiness. Instead, He prayed for our unity and that we would love one another.

The type of unity Jesus wanted us to have is worthy of noting as well because unity in and of itself is neutral. It becomes good or bad when influenced by something else. For example, if Christians united in a way contrary to God’s Word and His Will then it would not be a good unity. It would not be the type of unity Jesus prayed about for us. So, what should this unity look like? We can turn to the New Testament for plenty of examples as to the type of unity we should have as Christians.

For example, Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:3 to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” We should be unified, then, in the Holy Spirit (and the Holy Spirit will never lead us into sin). A few sentences later he continues with this theme of unity when he writes, “until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God...” (Ephesians 4:13). We should be unified, then, in faith. Paul provides another reminder in Galatians 6:10 that this unity we have with one another should be one of love. He writes, “while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” (emphasis added) This love we ought to have for another is repeated time and time again in the New Testament.

Maybe one of the best-known examples is in John 13:34-35 where the words of Jesus Himself are recorded.

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Quarterly Scripture Focus:

John 17:22-23

“The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”



As we announced in our last newsletter, Message of Hope has partnered with other individuals and ministries in the metro-Detroit area who share our passion for sharing the love of Jesus Christ with our friends inside. This network of brothers and sisters in Christ has taken on the name, Prison Ministry Collective.

We continue to meet on a monthly basis to: (1) connect individuals to volunteer opportunities that match their skills and talents; (2) reduce duplicity in ministry; (3) strengthen and encourage one another; and, (4) educate ourselves and each other about what is available to our friends inside and returning citizens as well as what is most needed.

In February, Steve Malek from **Gateway to Glory** spoke to the Collective about the Lord's work taking place at Macomb County Jail as well as how Gateway to Glory began and is structured. He stressed the importance of mentorship for returning citizens and shared some of the current needs the ministry has, such as: bicycles, a lawn mower, stamps, reading glasses, and outreach volunteers (for providing one-on-one visitation at the jail).

Due to the recommendation from the CDC to cancel public gatherings in order to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the March meeting was postponed. We look forward to hearing from our March speakers – Dawn & Gerry Gardner – in May about a program called **One Day With God**. One Day With God camps were started by Forgiven Ministry and involve a day inside prison where parent and child can reconcile with one another and spend time together (with God-anointed mentors working beside them). It is a divinely appointed time in which both parent and child can experience the love of God and find forgiveness and reconciliation.

In April (assuming normal operations have resumed), we are very excited to be hearing from Denise Harris, Field Director of Michigan for **Prison Fellowship**. We strongly encourage you to come out to this meeting to hear about the amazing things Prison Fellowship is doing in our area – especially their new Prison Fellowship Academy which will be launching at Macomb Correctional later this month.

The meeting details are as follows:

Date: Wednesday, April 22

Time: 7:00 – 8:30 p.m.

**Location: Kensington Church Clinton Township
25000 Hall Rd, Clinton Township, MI 48038**

For all our friends inside, please invite your families to come out and show their support! They will be encouraged as well as have an opportunity to be an encouragement!

To stay up-to-date on meetings and other announcements, check out the Prison Ministry Collective Facebook page at: facebook.com/prisonministrycollective

Message of Hope Jail and Prison Ministry



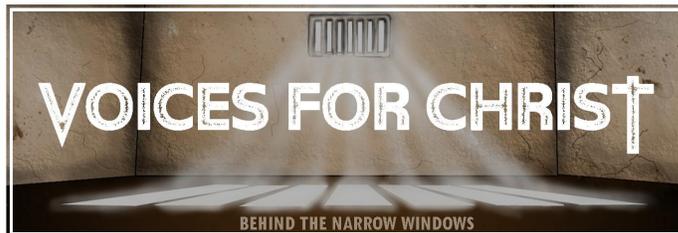
Next Step Christian Recovery is a Christ-centered Twelve Step program devoted to helping its members break the cycle of addiction in their lives. Below are some insights shared by Mike Berlanga, one of our members. Our hope is that others can learn more about God, as well as the program, through the insights he is willing to share.

Step Five “We admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

Pride is a funny thing that has me questioning this whole step. Why do I need to admit these things to God? He’s God, doesn’t He already know? Why do I have to admit these things to myself? I know what I’ve already done, isn’t this just redigging up my past that I’m supposed to be leaving behind? Why another person? Do I need someone else to know how horrible of a person I was? It all sounds pretty dumb to me, at least that is what my pride says. It is amazing how I can beat myself up over nothing. How much I will put myself through for nothing but refuse to do what is good for me. No matter what I have done, no matter how bad it is, God has forgiven me for ALL my sins. There is NO WAY that my ability to sin is bigger than God’s ability to forgive and if I think that it is, then that is pride. So, I have to set my pride aside and admit these wrongs to God, NOT for His sake (He already knows ALL that I have done!!) it is for me. In Step Four, I wrote down all the wreckage of my past, now it is time to begin the process of getting rid of that backpack full of rocks that I have been caring around for far too long. Who better to help me with that than my Heavenly Father. As far as admitting to myself the exact nature of my wrongs, I have been in denial of them and played the victim role for so long that I don’t even know they are not the real me. It is time to face my problems by taking ownership of them; face them so I can continue the healing process. The reason I have to admit these wrongs to another person can be summed up in one word – ACCOUNTABILITY. When I find someone I can trust and tell about the truth of my past, they can help me to heal from it and keep me accountable. This is not for someone to throw it back in my face but to ask how I am doing with my recovery and help me when I need it. I also felt like the load that I was carrying was cut in half when I shared it with someone else. Another very important reason is James 5:16, which tells us to confess our faults to one another and pray for one another so we can be healed. The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. My pride which is embarrassed of the exact nature of my wrongs has to be set aside so I can be healed from the wreckage of my past. I thank God that He has shown me the power of His forgiveness and how important it is to get ALL the garbage out.

Step Six “We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

It is amazing to me that even though I have been clean and sober for a long time now I still battle with some of my character defects. The great thing is, I can clearly see how destructive they really are in my life. As they come up (or if a new one develops) I am ready for God to remove it from me. I have absolutely no desire to be the old me I used to be. Even though change is uncomfortable, I am ready and it is worth it. I do not want to compromise with these burdens anymore. I do not want to live below the potential that God has for me anymore. I understand as it says in the conclusion of Step Six, I CANNOT take these defects away myself and truthfully I never could, but God can!! Again, I am now ready to let God remove them from me. Father God, help me to get through this time in my life when I choose what it says in Romans 12:2, “to not be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of my mind.” Father I know that this happens as I spend time with my brothers in Christ. I know that I am transformed as I spend time with You in Your word and in prayer. I am entirely ready to have You, Father, remove ALL of these defects of character from my new life. I am ready to live a life of surrender for the rest of my life with You doing it for me.



We want to hear from you!!!!

As of late, the number of submissions we are receiving for Voices for Christ has been down, so we wanted to let you know what the ministry is all about and ask you to consider sharing how God is working in your life in order to encourage others and carry out the Great Commission. Here is a bit more information regarding V4C:

Voices for Christ is dedicated to the Christian voices behind the narrow windows of prison and exists to provide an opportunity for you to communicate with the world and tell the story of how Christ has changed your heart and your life. It is the message of hope, comfort and freedom found in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Voices for Christ accepts and publishes works received from individuals currently incarcerated. These works are published on our ministry website and some are also published in our quarterly newsletter. All works must include full name and i.d. number as well as facility. The main body of the written submission may not be greater than 5,000 characters including spaces. A completed Consent to Publish must be submitted before any works can be published.

The following works, to name a few, will be accepted:

- **Testimonies**
- **Lessons**
- **Words of encouragement**
- **Poems**

Before inclusion on the website, all works will be reviewed to ensure they meet a minimum biblical standard. Voices for Christ reserves the right to reject submitted material and also reserves the right to edit any submissions for typographical errors. The anticipated time for works to be approved and uploaded to the website is 4-6 weeks.

In addition to maintaining biblical accuracy, Voices for Christ has established the following criteria:

- **Must promote Jesus Christ, not a religion or denomination**
- **Must not contain any offensive language**
- **Must not be divisive or argumentative**
- **Must be original material (plagiarism is not acceptable)**

Again, the purpose of the ministry is to provide an opportunity for you to share with the world how Jesus Christ has transformed you and/or how God is moving in your life. If you would like to be an encouragement to others and bring glory to God, please consider completing the Consent Form on the next page and then start sending your submissions!



Consent to Publish

For the mutual protection of Authors and Voices for Christ it is necessary that Authors provide formal written Consent to Publish before publication of their work. The signed Consent to Publish gives Voices for Christ the permission of the Author to publish the work on its website.

Please complete the Consent to Publish form, sign, and return this copy along with your initial submission. Your original consent form will be kept on file. Further consents do not need to be submitted, as this consent will remain effective until written rescission is received from the Author.

I, _____, consent to have my work used as part of Voices for Christ ministry. I understand any and all works I submit may be published on the Voices for Christ website. I understand that I will receive no compensation.

Name & I.D.: _____

Facility: _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip Code: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please add me to the Jpay account so I can submit electronically

All submissions, consents, and/or requests to be added to our Jpay account can be sent to us at the following address:

Voices for Christ
PO Box 221
Washington, MI 48094



Message of Hope Jail and Prison Ministry



This section of our newsletter, “From the Outside,” is for highlighting the struggles and victories of our returning citizens. It is reserved for the writings of Christian brothers and sisters who have been released and are willing to share some insights with those still inside. We are blessed to hear from Hunter Tokar this quarter.

“The Plan”

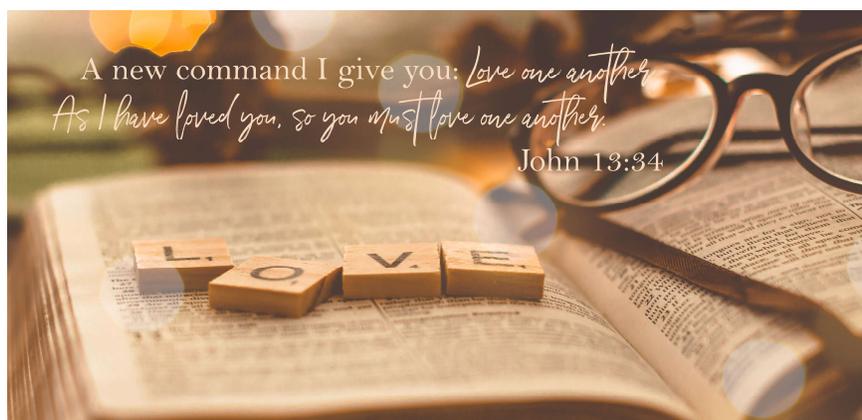
I had a vision and I had a plan for when I was released from prison. I had 11 years 9 months and 1 day to develop the plan. I have now been home for almost 3 years and to be honest, very little has gone according to the plan. Some of the people that I definitely thought would have my back did in the beginning, but then bailed. Others are still walking right beside me and helping me to succeed every day.

All of this has made me realize many things, but one thing specifically has been reinforced: it is good to have a plan, but God ultimately has a plan for my life and it is more important that I walk according to His plan than mine.

I have been incredibly blessed to be surrounded by people who continually remind me to seek God and to follow His direction. That sounds like it would be obvious, but truthfully I just wasn’t ready for how much the world had changed in the 12 years I was gone.

The best piece of advice that I can give to anyone preparing to transition back into society is to make sure that you have a mentor in place, if possible, and that you reach out for help in all aspects without being ashamed or afraid to ask for it. Too often, we feel like we should be able to come home and do it on our own. But the truth is we all need help and God has placed people in our life to help us. However, we often don’t accept or ask for the help that He has already placed right there. Relationships with people who have your best interest at heart are the most important thing you could have once you are released. Begin now to reach out to organizations and individuals to build bridges to help make your transition easier.

There are hurdles when you are released, don’t fool yourself into thinking there won’t be. Trust me, I’ve learned from experience that it is much easier to clear the hurdles with the right people helping lift you. I’m not telling you what I think, I’m telling you what I’ve lived.



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Jesus said, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” There is a popular song based on these verses that sums up this concept of love and unity. The lyrics are:

“We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord; We are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord; And we pray that our unity will one day be restored; And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; Yeah they'll know we are Christians by our love. We will work with each other, we will work side by side; We will work with each other, we will work side by side; And we'll guard each man's dignity and save each man's pride; And they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love; Yeah, they'll know we are Christians by our love.”

When we learn to live in unity – the way Jesus prayed about and the way God designed – we will find a greater sense of fulfillment and we will be all the more effective in our ministry. Just imagine what can be accomplished when we learn to foster unity – a unity rooted in the Holy Spirit, faith and love. We could reach the world for Christ!

My first thought in how to accomplish this is similar to my approach to lots of things – I must build it, I must put in the effort to accomplish it. (Notice the error in this approach? The emphasis is on me.) This doesn't quite fit with what Paul directs. Going back to Ephesians 4:3, Paul directs us to “*preserve* the unity of the Spirit...” (*emphasis added*) If unity is something to be preserved, then it must already exist! Doesn't God repeatedly tell us in His Word that we are one? that there is one flock and one shepherd? If that is true (and I wholeheartedly believe it is) then we do not need to build or create unity – we need to protect it!

Truth be told, it is from within the body of Christ I have experienced some of my deepest scars, grandest disappointments, and greatest resentments. But, it is also through God and the body of Christ that I have experienced the fulfillment of some of my deepest longings, grandest accomplishments, and greatest levels of love and faithfulness. It is the latter that I (and we) need to cling to when becoming frustrated with my brothers and sisters in Christ.

I am speaking to myself here more than anyone else, but I invite you to join me in putting into practice the truth and wisdom shared by the Apostle Peter when he wrote, “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins.”

Isn't it about time we stop looking for differences amongst our congregations, our ministries, our brothers and sisters in Christ, and instead learn to love one another! I encourage you to unite with me now and in the upcoming days, weeks and months in praying for the words of Jesus to be fulfilled – that we may be one; that we may foster unity rooted in the Holy Spirit, faith and love!



If you desire to answer God's calling in your life to carry a message of hope to our friends inside, below are some of the ways in which you can partner with us and #ServeWithMOH:

- Regular Volunteer – volunteering in a classroom setting with our Next Step Christian Recovery program
- Outreach Volunteer – visiting inside in a one-on-one setting
- Correspondence Course Instructor – providing lessons through the mail to our friends inside
- Card Ministry – sending out birthday, Christmas and Easter cards

Message of Hope Facebook Page:

facebook.com/messageofhopejailandprisonministry

Message of Hope Website:

messageofhope.org

Voices for Christ Website:

voices4christ.org

