

A Changed Heart

By Judy M

“Let’s get this over with!” I grumbled to myself as I helped the church chorus set up equipment to sing at the prison. The smile on my face didn’t match the thoughts clamoring through my mind. “What *are* we doing here? These men have often *exactly* what they deserved,” I murmured silently. Such was the condition of my heart as I climbed the risers to begin singing praises to our Lord.

We were half way through the first song when the Lord addressed the hypocrisy of what was occupying space in my heart and what was being proclaimed from my mouth. As I sang, I saw an image of Jesus out of the corner of my eye. He was standing in the midst of the prisoners with his left arm extended out as if embracing the shoulders of the 200 men who were present. ***“These are my people - I love them. Can you love them too?”*** He asked firmly, yet with compassion and love.

His words pierced my heart deeply and I began weeping uncontrollably throughout the performance. Using up all the tissues in my pocket, I proceeded to use the sleeve of my robe to wipe my eyes and nose - I was not a pretty sight! As I stood crumbling emotionally on the risers, my brokenness evident before all, I silently prayed, “Oh God, I have been forgiven of so much. You took a broken, ugly life of sin and freely offered compassion and hope. I’ve been shown so much grace. How could I be so unforgiving of others who have been ensnared and crushed?” I ached inside as he brought conviction regarding the judgment coming up out of my heart for those who had been imprisoned by the deceit of the world.

After the program, with tear-swollen eyes and quivering voice, I shared what had happened. I told them how Jesus held them in his arms, proclaiming his love for them. Then, from a changed heart, I asked them for forgiveness for my condemnation and judgment. The men I had condemned stood and clapped as they freely forgave and hungrily received the declaration of God’s love for them. I somehow felt their pain in my spirit and it reminded me of my own torment from the choices and actions of the past. It’s a torment that reaches down inside with devastating shame tearing away at our very being. *Yet, somewhere in those dark and lonely places we all long to believe that there is something within us that is worthy of being loved.*

I left the prison with joy in my heart that night but God wasn’t finished with me. You see, the very people I had resented became the people I wanted to serve. The cynical arrogance within my heart had turned to love and my husband and I began ministering in the prison every Friday night for more than two years. We were blessed over and over again by the very men I had deemed as unworthy.

Hosea 11:8 says, “My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused.” And 1 Cor. 13:4-8... *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”*

Thank you, Lord, for the tears that cleansed by your Spirit, bringing purity to see as you see and to love as you love.