

Lessons on Redemption from Those Serving Life in Prison

The second Friday of every January is called “Quitter’s Day.” It’s a day when massive numbers of people decide to give up on their new start, every year. If you didn’t make it past “Quitter’s Day” this year, or if you’ve just lost momentum in pursuing personal life change, April is actually known as “Second Chance Month” – an opportunity for another fresh start.

People quit on their new life goals at such high rates partly because they misunderstand what it takes to truly restart, to change directions. It isn’t just a matter of willpower, or even resources.

But the Calvin Prison Initiative (CPI) has been working to help prisoners restart their lives for 10 years now. The CPI provides a Christian liberal arts education to incarcerated individuals, who receive a double major over five years if successful. The people who come through our program know better than almost anyone else what it takes to get – and keep – a fresh start.

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In short, it takes relationships. It takes people investing in you. It takes people around you elevating themselves and bringing you with them.

You don’t just need willpower to change your life. You don’t just need resources. You need people, people who want the best for you.

That's part of why education is such a transformative part of rehabilitating prisoners, and the prison cultures that they help form. Education humanizes and elevates us like nothing else can.

A lot of prisoners have very low self-esteem. They don't respect themselves, or think they're capable of much. Additionally, many of them are almost totally unable to reconcile with the guilt and shame over the crimes they've committed. But education helps them change that. What's more, education helps them change the prisons in which they live and work.

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The prison where CPI started was called "gladiator school." It was a rough place. But within 3-4 years of our program, violence had dropped by 80%. An administrator called it "Candyland." The inmates who were in for life sentences – "lifers," arguably the most influential inmates in prison cultures – had been transformed, and the prison had been along with it.

These "lifers" had become a cloud of witnesses to everyone else in the prison: You're not worthless. You're worth investing in. It had a profound impact on the men who were in for shorter terms.

They saw guys who were in prison for life, with no real chance at leaving prison, working really hard to better themselves. They saw these men come to view themselves and their lives with respect, humility and real repentance. They watched these men let themselves be a new person. And, naturally, they wanted that fresh start for themselves. They saw a path to never becoming just another quitter.

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