



A Story of a Formerly Incarcerated Person

Pastor Jon Kelly

Well good afternoon everyone, and this is definitely a blessing to be here, and to be talking about something that is dear on my heart. As he said, my name is Jon Kelly. I'm the lead pastor at Chicago West Bible Church, in the Austin neighborhood, on the west side, and I think the Lord obviously knows what he's doing, because I'm pretty much gonna piggyback on what my brother said here, about re-entry.

I know there's a lot of things we're gonna cover over the next few hours, but I wanna speak specifically to re-entry, and of men and women returning to society. I want to speak specifically to the church.

Maybe to give you a little backdrop, and framework about where I'm coming from, maybe to share a few minutes about myself, and my story. I was born in Chicago, but I grew up in Philadelphia, with a single parent mother, and my little sister. We grew up in a very poor, under-resourced section in North Philadelphia, didn't have a father in the house, very crime-infested neighborhood. So, I as a teenager, I pretty much spent a majority of my teenage years in juvenile detention centers. I probably was home for maybe six months of the year, but was always in and out of jail, getting in trouble.

That was really much the pattern of my life as a teenager. If you could imagine the most angry, frustrated, disrespectful, always high, getting kicked out of class, always getting shot at, or shooting at somebody at the playground teenager, that was me.

And unfortunately, that mentality, and that lifestyle, caused me at the age of 19, to go with a group of friends, to rob a drug dealer in the neighborhood, in which one of my friends shot, and killed him. So, we all were arrested, and here I am as a 19 year old, looking at the death penalty, and life in prison.

My first week in solitary confinement, because maximum security, the maximum security section at prison was so overpopulated with violent crimes, anyone who came in, had to go into isolation. So, my first experience in there was, in isolation, it was a prison guard who gave me a Bible, have me something to read. It was my first time having God's word in my hand. I began reading it, and my eyes were opened, my heart was changed, and I haven't been the same since.

I'm a firm believer that God doesn't need anyone to do anything. He can get his word to you. Amen.

Well, part of during that season, coming to faith and Christ, I was 19, and part of taking repentance is, taking ownership of what you done. I remember telling my lawyer, "I'm a follower of Christ now, and I'm not gonna plead not guilty of this. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and if I get the death penalty, or life in prison, then so be it, because that's what's right. But repentance is taking ownership, and would you just at least give me the opportunity to ask forgiveness of the family?"

So, I went in front of the judge. I asked for forgiveness, went in front of the victim's parents, and asked for forgiveness, and I had planned to spend the rest of my life in prison, making disciples, and I threw myself on the mercy of the Lord, and the court. The judge showed me grace, and gave me six to 15 years for third degree murder, and five years probation for robbery.

Went on to state prison, and got my GED in prison. After I got my GED, I became a GED tutor, to help other men get their GED, because I knew they didn't have a shot at anything if they didn't at least have a GED.

While in prison, I studied carpentry, and HVAC, and by God's grace, made parole after serving six years, in 2008. It's okay to clap.

Came home in 2008, and got plugged into a church in West Philadelphia right away, and wanted to connect with youth. So, I figured maybe there's other young men and women out there, who are just like me, who came from a broken home, and didn't have a dad in the house. Maybe I can connect with them in a way that their parents can't.

So, I began serving there, in this church called, Christian Stronghold Baptist Church, and that's where I met my wife. She was a youth worker, and I got her digits. We got married, and we moved on, moved to Chicago in 2011, so I can attend Moody Bible Institute. I went to Moody, and spent four years studying theology, and graduated in 2015.

While at Moody, served as a family pastor at a church called, Harvest Bible Chapel, and had a heart to go back into a neighborhood just like where I came from, to see God do something great there. In 2016, we launched Chicago West Bible Church on the west side, in the Austin neighborhood. Praise God.

By God's grace, I always wanted to continue my education, believing that as a high school dropout, I have such a value for education now, I became a Chuck Colson scholar, which gives me a free ride, here at Wheaton. So, I started my first semester here this year, and it's been a true blessing. So, if there is any question if God can take the hardest, craziest, wildest teen, who has done some things that are so shameful, and save them, God can.

Audience: Amen.

But here's one of the things that I want to touch on. When I came home from prison, there was three things available to me, that's not normally available to most people coming home from prison, but it's crucial. I got a job first week out. My mother no longer lived in that same neighborhood. She now moved into a different environment that was far more safe, and I got connected to a community of believers in a church. Great things, job available, and that job came actually from a man who taught anger management, and alternatives to violence. He was a volunteer that went into the prisons to teach that, and I became a volunteer with him, inside the prison. When he found out I was released, he immediately sought me out, and hired me to work as a painter in his construction company, with no background. But, he intentionally said, I'm gonna give you a job, and I'm gonna walk with you.

My mother, in spite of everything I've put her through, gave me a place to stay, and said, "I will be a resource to you."

And the men in this church said, "You know what? It's not about just coming here on Sunday, and giving your testimony so we can boast about that, but there's a plate at my table for you, every week." So, these men did life with me, and I wish I could say that was the truth for a lot of Christians in the church, but that wasn't the case. But these men in the church, they were willing to pour into me.

So, while we are aggressive about resources, and the resources are needed, the thing that I would say that was most crucial for my success, was that I had deep, meaningful, healthy relationships, when I never had that in my entire life.

And as I think through ... It's okay, my sister back there, to clap. You can clap. Now, the reason why that's important is, because as my brother shared, there are thousands of men and women, who are coming home today, entering back into society, and as the church, we have really dropped the ball on this, as fully embracing them.

We have done a good job at advocating for programs, and resources, but we have not done a good job at letting people sit at the dinner table. So, what we found was, and what I found is, I talk to other men and women who are believers, who came home from prison. Many of them didn't have the resources. They didn't have the job waiting for them. They had to go back to the same neighborhood, even though they didn't want to go there, but that was the only place they could stay.

Then, even if they did have the resources, they didn't have healthy relationships around them. I will tell you, I got the job, but I lost it in 2008, when the economy crashed. And what kept me grounded, I had men who were in my life, cheering me on, encouraging me day by day.

I never saw a husband lead his wife in prayer, until I sat at the dinner table with these men. I didn't know what it was like for a father to lead his family, until I sat at the dinner table with

these men, so you can offer someone a job, but you can't give them a way to, or a hand to them, how to be prepared for that job, and to handle it right. You can offer someone money, but you can't give them stewardship, they have to learn that through relationships.

What we found was, that there were men and women who were zealous to come inside the prisons, to do Bible study, but when we hit the door, and it was time to go home, they weren't there. Or, if they were, it was maybe to hook up at a coffee shop real quickly, at Starbucks, to thank you for getting out, and then maybe I can make some phone calls, and get you connected with this job, but the same people who were willing to come in prison to disciple you, weren't willing to let you sit at their dinner table. That's a serious problem. We've dropped the ball that way, and it's stretching for us.

Even as we think about that now, right? It's, "Well Pastor Jon, is that really wise? Is it okay for me to really have this man, or this woman around my daughter, and my kids, and my home? That sounds a little dangerous."

Well, my response to that is, so is preaching the gospel in Iran.

Audience: Right.

So is preaching the gospel in Pakistan. When has the great commission ever become something that's so easy, and not dangerous?

Audience: Amen.

But we can't sit back, and wait on the government. And when Jesus says, in Matthew 25, "You gave me something to eat, you gave me something to drink." That wasn't just in a format of a program. That was organic people, willing to be accessible, and saying, "You can enter my life."

I will just say to you, that doesn't cost money. You don't have to be a scholar. You don't have to be in an organization, for you to say to a young lady, or a young man, there is a place at my dinner table, and I'm willing to walk with you. I'm willing to meet you at the door. That may cost something. It doesn't guarantee us that every single person we encounter will come to faith, and Christ. It doesn't guarantee us that every single person will respond the right way, or even handle the offer, and your extended arm right, but what it means is, there's at least an opportunity for that.

So, my challenge maybe, to us here is, if we're gonna talk about mass incarceration, but not make our dinner table available, it's a fail. As believers, I'm not talking about the government, I'm just talking about us believers, and let that stretch us, that our dinner table needs to be that.

So, I just really have one take away, maybe two take aways for you, sitting here, two thoughts maybe to wrestle through. One is just an observation, something you can think through, and one is a personal question.

The first thing is, if you're in your church, and maybe you are aggressive about going into the county jails, or the state prisons, and that's great. Praise God for that. We need more people going into there, but my prayer is that you would be twice as aggressive when they hit the front door, and they're free. And if your church is weak with that, maybe that's something you should pray about, and have a honest question about, because when people need you the most, is when they hit the front door, and they're not free, after being incarcerated for 10 years, or five years, or how many years, and they need support. Don't play it safe, believe it or not, it's actually easier to go into prison, and to do Bible studies, than to meet someone at the door, and walk with them.

The second question is a little bit more personal, and I want you to think about me, and I want you to wrestle with this, as I wrap up, but do you think that you can disciple a convicted murderer?

You look at Jon Kelly now, with a blazer on, and a Moody graduate, and at Wheaton, but, could you have taken that 19 year old kid, and walked with him, for the last 15 or so years?

I think that's a real question we need to wrestle with, because what I found when I came home, praise God, for these men who poured into me. I would not be the husband and the father, and the person I am today, if it wasn't for them. But there was also a handful, a large number of Christians, who weren't willing to do that, and that was heartbreaking for me.

There was a barrier that I sensed, unspoken, and within the church I even went to. It was "Hey, this is great. Great testimony, great for what God is doing, man. Did you hear about brother Jon? But don't get too close to my kids." And that was very painful.

So, as we talk, and I share my experience, my hope would be that we would leave here with a stronger presence, in meeting people at the door in a more willingness to always have a plate at our dinner table. Amen.

Audience: Amen.

Well, thanks for allowing me to share my story.