

## Prisoners and the least of these in American Protestantism

By [Aaron Griffith](#)

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American evangelicals and mainliners often seem worlds apart when it comes to engagement with social issues. Take prisons as a case in point. The rhetoric diverges along the lines that one might expect: [mainliners](#) rail against the American mass incarceration system, the new Jim Crow that locks away minorities and the poor and is sustained by in-prison private labor and for-profit facilities. They want to fight this sinful system through activism (protests and petitions), academia (lectures and scholarly books), and artistic endeavors (photo essays and poetry).

Evangelicals seek inmate conversion. Though they may share mainliners' views on the systemic issues at stake, the goal is to save inmates' souls and to bring them peace with God. Indeed, prison is in some ways an ideal mission field: the evangelical prison chaplain or volunteer doesn't have to work too hard to convince their inmate audience that they are sinners in need of salvation. The [Romans' Road](#) takes a nice downhill grade when it begins in prison.

Obviously this is an oversimplification. Plenty of evangelicals argue against the injustice of the prison system, and many in-prison ministries (including the one for which I volunteer) are indebted to mainline church efforts.

But what if these approaches aren't all that different? Stanley Hauerwas [has written](#), "The Christian right and the Christian left do not disagree about the religious status of the American experiment." Could he also be right about the religious status of the American prison experiment? One commonality in how American Protestants from across the theological spectrum think about prisons is their reliance on Jesus' discussion of "the least of these" in [Matt. 25:31-46](#). These verses have been and continue to be everywhere in prison ministry rhetoric. They were quoted in a statement in the 1787 constitution of the Philadelphia Society for Alleviating the Miseries of Public Prisons. In recent years mainliners have used the passage to justify their [broader social justice outlook](#), while evangelicals take it more literally to [validate their in-prison proselytization](#).

But both those interpretations may be off target. The general consensus of many in biblical studies circles as well as most of the Church Fathers is that “the least of these” are not the oppressed, hungry, or imprisoned masses that the church goes out and helps. Instead, the phrase refers simply to Christians. Those who are being judged before the throne of God are non-Christians, evaluated by how they treated Christians living among them.

Why have both mainliners and evangelicals in America missed this insight? Probably in part because this reading requires a relatively technical understanding of Greek phrases at work in the passage. But perhaps it also has something to do with the fact that evangelicals and mainliners, despite their differences, both understand their prison work as bringing something badly needed to prisoners. Yet they hesitate to see the convict and prison as a person and place that are close to the heart of the crucified God.

What would it mean to understand the story of “the least of these” as being less about noble Christians saving those in prison and more about the explicit connection of the status of the prisoner to that of the believer? Indeed, if Karl Barth is [correct](#) that the first Christian community was the criminals crucified beside Jesus, then perhaps we would do well to ask ourselves what God might already be doing inside these shut-away places.

Remembering that God is already in the spaces of the incarcerated, and loves those behind bars, might teach us all something new. It might remind evangelicals to look for ways that prisoners can preach the gospel to them. It might remind the mainliner to seek the blessing of fellowship with a person in prison. These are lessons worth learning as part of our worship of the holy criminal whose death and resurrection we remember this Easter season.

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