Have you ever thought about what it would be like to spend over half of your life in jail? Most of us can’t fathom the thought of even visiting a jail, much less having to live in a jail cell. But, that’s just what over 154,000 inmates did at the former Ohio State Reformatory of Mansfield in it’s 94 years as a working prison.

Recently, Ben Snyder and a crew of CedarCreek folks visited the now vacant Mansfield reformatory to witness its history and gaze upon its Chateauesque features. Interestingly, the architect specifically designed the prison as a means to encourage inmates back to a “rebirth” of their spiritual lives and to inspire them to turn away from their sinful lifestyle and to turn toward repentance. Perhaps some inmates experienced this “rebirth” that the architect hoped for, but it’s likely that a number of them never quite recovered from their “imprisoned” state.

The1994 movie, “Shawshank Redemption,” which was shot entirely on the Mansfield Reformatory grounds, did a great job of depicting the horrific and somewhat unsettling challenges that inmates likely experienced. Yet, it also displayed the triumphal victory that hope and true freedom can bring. In the movie, there was a scene where Brooks, who spent his entire adult life in prison, was finally released. Most would think that would be the greatest day ever, but not Brooks. After being released, he felt alone and fearful and scared most days because for most of Brooks’ life, he was told what to do, when to do it and how to basically live his life. He became what’s termed “institutionalized”; that is living life conforming to a basic set rules defined by a systematic way of living.

The opposite was true for Shawshank inmate Andy Defrasne. He said we all have to make a choice “to get busy living or get busy dying.” Andy chose to get busy living and abolished any thoughts of living institutionalized. Andy then inspired Red, another life-time inmate, to live the same way. When Red was finally released from prison, he realized that fear can hold you prisoner but hope can set you free.

A lot of us can likely relate to the prison that Brooks found himself in when he was finally released. While we haven’t gone so far as taking our own lives like Brooks’ did, we find ourselves living imprisoned and shackled by the shame and guilt of the terrible things we’ve done in our lives. And so we follow this “institutionalized” thinking that if we do certain works, perform certain tasks, overly commit to service activities that somehow this will act as payment for all the wrong we have done in our lives. Or, we become blinded by our own “self-righteous thinking” that we have earned God’s approval by all the work that we have done. And so we try and try. Then, we fail. Miserably. And the cycle continues.

This institutionalized thinking has no merit or bearing on the grace that God freely provides. We don’t have to pay for it, we can’t earn it and we certainly can’t obtain it by performing works or certain acts. If you are living in this type of “works” jail, there’s hope for your release. But be cautious: true freedom and hope that Red ever so eloquently inspired us with in the Shawshank movie can only come from God’s underserved and unmerited grace. Do you accept God’s free gift of grace?

MEGATHEMES
“The Grace of God” For the week beginning 5.7.12

Fear can hold you prisoner. Hope can set you Free!
- Shawshank Redemption

THIS WEEK WE WILL LEARN ABOUT GOD’S LOVING, UNDESERVING AND FREE GIFT OF GRACE
MONDAY — Criminal Minded

**Big Point:** Freedom comes when we realize that sin causes us all to become criminal minded and we can’t do anything to **earn** God’s grace.

The latest neuroscience research is presenting intriguing evidence that the brains of certain kinds of criminals are different from those of the rest of the population. The research shows that most people with these criminal minds have what’s called an “antisocial personality disorder.” The Mayo Clinic says these people "typically have no regard for right and wrong. They may often violate the law and the rights of others." Criminals like Joseph Kony, the head of a Ugandan guerrilla group responsible for an estimated 66,000 children becoming soldiers and displacing two million people. And individuals like Osama Bin Laden and Timothy McVeigh.

But, when you lay that research down in the eyes of God as we view sin, we all could be termed “criminal minded.” We know right from wrong yet we still sin. We disregard right from wrong in God’s eyes when we fight and argue with each other and go to sleep when we are still angry. We disregard right from wrong in God’s eyes when we gossip about each other and violate the rights of others. We disregard right from wrong when we subtly manipulate others to get what we want. Yes, we are all criminal minded sinners.

And, you could also say we become criminal minded to believe that when our sin is exposed, that we can earn God’s grace by doing a whole lot of work to earn His favor. God says to you, and even to the criminals listed above, that He will extend grace to those who believe and trust in Him. Often times we feel the need to do this extra work and we become these “self-exiled” prisoners believing that God can never love us since we can never do enough to earn his love. We just have to get over that. Andy Stanley describes grace in his book, *The Grace of God* as “the offer of exactly what we do not deserve … grace can only be experienced by those who acknowledge that they are underserving.” There lies the tension. The bottom line is we are all criminals underserving of God’s grace, but God still extends this free gift of grace to us—all of us, even the most heinous criminals who call Jesus their Lord and Savior. We simply need to get out of our own way of trying to earn it and freely accept it.

Read and Think….Find Answers in the Bible

What does the following verse tell us about mankind, including ourselves?

**1 John 1:8 (New Living Translation)**

*If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth.*

**Answer:**

In Ephesians 2:1-3, Paul writes about our poor choices as sinners. What is the response that we deserve from God?
Ephesians 2:1-3 (New Living Translation)
Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers of the world in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. All of us used to live that way, following the passions and desires of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.

Answer:

What does the following passage say about mankind’s sinful nature?

Romans 7:21-25 (New Living Translation)
I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God’s law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God’s law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin.

Answer:

LIVE...What will you do now?
Who comes to mind when you think about the worst criminals from history lessons or in today’s news? How do you feel knowing that God would extend His grace to them upon their repentance?

In Ephesians 2:3, it says that we are all subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else, including the criminals you listed. How does this change your thoughts regarding this gift of grace from God?

Is there a sin that you cannot seem to break free from? How has this affected your view of God’s grace in your life? In Romans 7:21-25, what hope does Paul reveal?

Pray ... God what do you want me to know & do?
Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to release the mindset that God’s grace is performance based. Praise God for this generous gift of grace in Jesus Christ who has already suffered and sacrificed his life for all of your sins, regardless of what you have done.

Reminder: You’ll find the Daily Bible Reading commentary for the Daily Bible Reading Plan by going to www.livingitout.tv and clicking on the appropriate commentary links that precede the reading for a particular day. The Daily Bible Reading will alternate from Old Testament to New Testament throughout 2012.
TUESDAY—Wonderful Grace—Sufficient for You

Big Point: From the human perspective, God's grace is sufficient for only some. From God's perspective, God's grace is sufficient for all.

Ten years ago on May 11, Eric Smallridge left Pensacola Beach, Florida after a night of drinking. He thought he could drive home safely without incident. At twenty-four-years-old, Smallridge thought he was invincible. He was wrong. He lost control of his car, sending another vehicle carrying 20-year-olds Meagan Napier and Lisa Dickson careening into a tree. The girls were killed on impact. Smallridge stood trial and was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison.

It would seem that Meagan Napier’s mother, Renee, would have every reason in the world to angrily appeal the Judge’s sentence of twenty-two years. Why not his whole life? After all, Smallridge’s decision cost Renee’s daughter her life. However, Renee’s attitude has been astounding. She has not only forgiven Smallridge, but in 2006, both girls’ families requested that his sentence be reduced. He will be released in November of this year.

What could lead a parent who has lost her child to forgive such a debt? “I could be angry, hateful and bitter,” stated Renee Napier. “But I didn’t want to live my life that way. There was no way I could move on and live a happy life without forgiving Eric. I’ve grown to love him and his family. They have been so supportive. This isn’t about me anymore. This is about Meagan and Lisa.”

Keeping her promise to make it about Meagan and Lisa, Mrs. Napier has been making presentations around the state of Florida, speaking to teenagers about the dangers of drunk driving. Eric Smallridge has been granted special permission to leave his prison to co-present these talks. They make a powerful appeal to students who will hopefully receive the message that drinking and driving is dangerous.

But it’s the message of forgiveness that transcends in this story. "We live in a world with a lot of pain and heartache, I want to promote love and forgiveness and help break that cycle of hatred," said Napier. And once you forgive, grace is freely extended.

Read and Think….Find Answers in the Bible

According to this passage, what was our state before Christ gave us life? According to verse seven, why has Christ shown this mercy and given us this grace?

**Ephesians 2:4-7 (New Living Translation)**

4 But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, 5 that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) 6 For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. 7 So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

**Answers:**

The grace of God always precedes the law of God’s grace

- Andy Stanley
LIVE ..... What will you do now?
Think about your reaction to the story of Eric Smallridge. What do you think of Renee Napier’s decision and ability to forgive Eric? Do you find it unbelievable? Do you find it difficult to believe that God could forgive even beyond this magnitude?

Describe the times when you have craved grace when your guilt was exposed?

It’s likely that Eric Smallridge craved grace when his guilt was exposed. Yet, Renee Napier did not “crucify” him. Instead she created a relationship with Eric. Can you name individuals in the Bible who likely should have gotten the “legal smack down” for something wrong that they did but instead their relationship with God increased? Has anyone ever extended grace to you like Renee Napier extended to Eric? Describe what that felt like.

He is jealous for me.
Loves like a hurricane, I am a tree.
Bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy.
When all of a sudden.
I am unaware of these afflictions eclipsed by glory.
And I realize just how beautiful You are.
And how great Your affections are for me.
And O how He loves us
Oh, O how He loves us
How He loves us all.
“He Loves Us,” David Crowder

Pray ... God, what do you want to know and do?
Begin by meditating on the grace of God. Ask God to remind you what it is like to feel His infinite grace. Ask God to help you accept His true nature. Ask God to reveal any areas in your life where you may need to extend grace to another.
**WEDNESDAY — Pure and Simple: Salvation**

**Big Point:** Jesus Christ has given us the one thing we could never earn on our own to restore our relationship with our Father—and that’s salvation!

In the beginning of the week we focused on our need for salvation because we are all “criminal minded” sinners. When we accept this free gift of salvation, it’s hard for us to grasp the idea of receiving something for nothing. We all quickly fall into what we know of this world and how it works around us—we think we need to earn it to truly have it. Sometimes we feel to own something also means we deserve it. The problem with this is that we could never truly live up to the standards needed to earn righteousness. The amazing transaction on the cross was God treating His only son, Jesus Christ, as if he had lived your life; so God could treat you as if you had lived the life of Christ. The way God delivered salvation through Jesus Christ was a great example in a world that is filled with suffering. So we rejoice that we worship a God who is not immune to suffering but actually conquers it.

Salvation is an undeserved gift given to us through grace. The “works” idea that so many people fall into trying to deserve or earn salvation is tiring and always ends in frustration, guilt, and eventually abandonment—like prison. The salvation we are given is not a “cheap grace” and trying to purchase it with our righteous acts is an insult to our Father. Imagine giving a gift to a friend and those friends insisting to pay you for the gift repeatedly even after your refusal? Wouldn’t that be insulting to your grace and what you were trying to do? Why is God’s gift any different?

If you are reading this week’s Living It Out and God has shown you for the first time the need of His salvation and the readiness of God to give His gift through grace and love, there will be a prayer known as the “Salvation Prayer” at the end of today’s Living It Out. Jesus is always knocking; this is another chance to open the door and invite him into your life.

READ and THINK...Find the answers

After reading Monday’s Living It Out we realize that all of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If being a sinner and needing help is something we all share, explain why is the following scripture so important?

**Mark 2:16-17 (New International Version)**

16 When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: “Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?” 17 On hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

**Answer:**

After reading the next verse, how do you think God really views our works and “good deeds”? How important is it that Christ came to release us from this sin?

**Isaiah 64:6 (New International Version)**

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
Answer:

After reading God’s answer to Paul in the following verse, how important is it for us not to cover our weaknesses with good deeds and righteous acts? Christ’s power is salvation; how can this forgiveness change your life in the future? How has this forgiveness changed your life so far?

2 Corinthians 12:9 (New International Version)
But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me.

Answer:

LIVE...What will you do now?
Why is that we feel we have to be qualified to be God’s child instead of just thirsting for His salvation?

Do you get tired of constantly trying to measure up—comparing your works to others around you? Why do we understand the aspect of receiving a gift but have a hard time understanding the gift of salvation from our Heavenly Father?

Good works don’t save a person; but they’re good evidence they are saved. Did you catch that? Write down why this is important to understand. What is the difference?

“If you’re a Christian, you’re a member of the only group in the world where the only qualification for membership is that you’re unqualified. The problem is, after becoming a Christian most of us spend most of our lives trying to qualify.”

Steve Brown, Seminary Pastor and Syndicated Radio Host

If you have prayed the prayer of salvation before and accepted Christ into your life, describe how this has positively impacted your life and the life of others? If you feel you have strayed off the beaten path by trying to earn grace, this is a perfect opportunity to point yourself back toward God’s grace—free of judgment and condemnation.

If you have not accepted Christ as your personal savior, we invite you to read this prayer of salvation:

Heavenly Father, I know that I am a sinner and I ask for your forgiveness of my sins. I believe Jesus is the son of God and that he died for me and he rose again. I give you my life and I thank you for new life. Thank you Jesus for your unlimited grace which has saved me from my sins and I ask that you transform my life so that I may bring glory and honor to you alone and not to myself.
THURSDAY — You are a Masterpiece!

**Big Point:** Our past sins and the life we lived before coming to Christ should not cloud our vision of who God has called us to be.

Who do you see when you look in the mirror each day? Do you see the person you were before you began your relationship with Christ or are you holding onto the past and the person you were, or the things you did to others, allowing them to define your image?

We sometimes hold onto our past and identify ourselves as who we once were, or allow others to do so. Whether it be a murderer, thief, addict, abused child or a neglected spouse, now that you’ve established a relationship with Christ, is that who you truly are? When we define ourselves, we often focus on the negative aspects of our lives, such as the former addictions, the abuse we endured or perhaps inflicted upon someone else, or even by the pesky 15-20 pounds that we can’t seem to lose.

If only we viewed ourselves as Christ does, we’d see in our reflection his beauty and love. Our reflection changed the moment we accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior. Second Corinthians 5:17 tells that “Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things are passed away; behold, new things have come.” There is no greater love than the love He has for each of us. Focusing on our past or allowing others to define us is a rejection of that love. Who knows us better than our Heavenly Father, the One who created us in His image, and knew us before we were formed? Take pride in knowing that we have been molded by His hands to be His vessels.

We sometimes find it difficult to understand our identity as Christ’s masterpiece through the confusion of our “criminal minded” sin, fear or doubt. We must learn to believe that God’s promises are true. Paul shows us in Ephesians that God loves us too much to let us stay as we are.

**READ and THINK...Find the answers**

According to Ephesians 2:10, what has to happen for us to do the good things God has planned for us?

**Ephesians 2:10 (New Living Translation)**

For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things He planned for us long ago.

**Answer:**

What does Psalm 139:14 tell us how God made us and how we should view ourselves?

**Psalm 139:14 (New Living Translation)**

Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous — how well I know it.

**Answer:**
LIVE...What will you do now?
Identify who or what in your past is holding you back from living the life Christ intended for you to live.

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is the opportunity to start a new life in Him. Do you feel that you received a fresh and beautiful start when you began your new life with God? What does your life look like now because of this fresh start?

Have you come to the realization that you are wonderfully complex and that God created you that way for a purpose? What got you to this point?

All this pain
I wonder if I'll ever find my way.
I wonder if my life could really change at all.
All this earth.
Could all that is lost ever be found.
Could a garden come up from this ground at all.
You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of the dust.
You make beautiful things
You make beautiful things out of us

“Beautiful Things,” by Gungor

Do you know the good things that God planned for you long ago as outlined in Ephesians 2:10? If so, what are they?

And finally, take time today to reflect on how you truly feel now that you know that God’s desire is to turn you into His very own masterpiece.

PRAY...God, what do you want me to know & do?
Think back to the moment when you first decided to live for Christ. Ask God to reveal that moment to you and joyously allow Him to mold you, like a clay vessel, into the masterpiece He created you to be.
FRIDAY — Accept God’s story for your life

Big Point: God wants you to accept His story for your life by receiving His free gift of salvation, and that of grace, and to extend that same type of grace to others.

It’s likely that we all will subtly fall into the if we do “X,” then God will do “Y” institutionalized way of thinking even after hearing Ben’s message this past weekend, and even weeks after conducting this Bible study. Sadly, we’ll often believe Satan’s lie that says that we are not allowed to have God’s free gift of grace. Even worse, we will stand in judgment believing that we deserve God’s grace more than others.

To help us close out the week, we’d like to share an excerpt from Andy Stanley’s book, The Grace of God. We highly encourage you to get this book as it will greatly bless you and allow you to continue your study on God’s grace. Here’s what Andy has to say about what God says about your story:

“In your story you are going to continue searching for a reason God should love you. In your story you are going to continue finding reasons he shouldn’t. So here’s my suggestion: give up your version of your story and embrace his. In his story, he loves you no matter what you’ve done. In His story, He doesn’t love you because of what you’ve done. In His story, He could not love you more and He will never love you less. It’s a better story. It’s a true story. It’s a story of grace. The grace of God!”

We pray that this Bible study has encouraged you not to fall back into the rut that you have to earn grace—that form of institutionalized thinking that we mentioned at the beginning of the week. Take some time to answer a few more questions as we close this week’s Bible study and pray about what God wants you to know and do this week.

READ and THINK...Find the answers

We spent a substantial amount of time reviewing and breaking down Ephesians 2:1-10 throughout the week. Take a moment to review chapter two and verses one through ten in their entirety and write out what most resonates with you and why.

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. 2 You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. 3 All of us used to live that way, following the passionate desires and inclinations of our sinful nature. By our very nature we were subject to God’s anger, just like everyone else.

4 But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, 5 that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!) 6 For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. 7 So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has

Grace is not reserved for good people, grace underscores the goodness of God - Andy Stanley
done for us who are united with Christ Jesus.

8 God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. 9 Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. 10 For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Answer

LIVE...What will you do now?
What were the two most profound things you learned this week as it relates to the grace of God?

God loves our praises to Him and He especially loves when we surrender our will to His. Take some time to write an “I surrender” letter to God on a separate piece of paper and define what you are willing to give up in order for Him to do the good things He has planned for your life.

Write out the names of two people that you can think of who would benefit from hearing this “Grace of God” message. Then, go to cedarcreek.tv and scroll to the bottom of the page and find “Media Player” and forward this message to them.

PRAY...God, what do you want me to know & do?
Ask God to help you stay out of the grace rut of “institutionalized”, self-exiled or self-righteous thinking. Ask Him to help you accept His story for your life and to learn about ways to encourage others as they accept God’s amazing grace!

Weekend Updates!

- **Watch Lee Powell dance to benefit injured army veterans**— “Dancing With The Military Stars” is a benefit and community event that will take place on Saturday, May 12th, sponsored by The Arms Forces nonprofit that assists military veterans who have a traumatic brain injury or post-traumatic stress or other invisible wounds. You won’t want to miss our very own lead Pastor Lee Powell as he puts his best foot forward. Follow this link for ticket information: http://www.thearmsforces.org/dancingwiththemilitarystars/index.html

- **Help Benefit Local and Regional Missions**—Put a golf team together to participate in a July 14th golf outing. Contact John at johnm@cedarcreek.tv for more information. And/or, run in a 5k on June 30th at 10am at the Perrysburg campus. Contact globaldistance@cedarcreek.tv.

- **Fusion Camp**—Each summer, hundreds of middle school students enjoy an incredible week of fun, friendship, worship and Bible study at Camp Michindoh. Registration is open now, but don’t delay because spots usually fill up. Questions? Contact the church office at 419.661.8661.
Living It Out: May 2012 *NEW

I do not treat the grace of God as meaningless. For if keeping the law could make us right with God, then there was no need for Christ to die.

*Galatians 2:21*

Living It Out

*It is the dream of CedarCreek that everyone who calls this their church home will be reading and studying the same topics, both individually and in groups. Each week, join with thousands of others at CedarCreek Church in applying God’s Word, the Bible, into your daily life. Our hope is that while we learn and grow together, as individuals and as a church, we will collectively live out the weekend message.*

Living It Out resources, such as the Daily Bible Study, Daily Bible Reading Plan, Discussion Questions and Scripture Memory Verses, are designed to help us embrace a missional mindset...a mindset that compels us to love Jesus, serve others and tell the world about Christ.

**Living It Out: Daily Bible Study**…Daily Bible study activities to reflect on the weekend message

**Living It Out: Daily Bible Reading Plan**…Read through the Bible in a year

**Living It Out: Discussion Questions**…Weekly questions to discuss with others

**Living It Out: Scripture Memory**…Memorize one Bible verse per month

All of these resources are also available electronically at [www.livingitout.tv](http://www.livingitout.tv), where you can subscribe to have any or all of them emailed to you as they are updated.

We Want Your Feedback!

Tell us about any questions or comments you have about this week’s Living It Out: Daily Bible Study. Forward them to dianap@cedarcreek.tv.

---

**CedarCreek Church**

29129 Lime City Road
Perrysburg, Oh 43551
Phone: 419.661.8661
Fax: 419.661.8665

[www.cedarcreek.tv](http://www.cedarcreek.tv)
[www.livingitout.tv](http://www.livingitout.tv)

**RESOURCES:**

*The Grace of God by Andy Stanley*

**Living It Out: Daily Bible Reading Plan**

Scriptures are listed for each day. By completing each of the daily readings, you will read the entire Bible in 1 year. These readings are separate from the Daily Bible Study.

**This week’s Living It Out: Daily Bible Study**

written by:

Alyssa Baker
Cynthia Savage
Diana Patton
JoAnna Studer
Ryan Wilson