

The Worth of a Man

by Oscar Patterson

Shortly after my conversion, I foolishly regarded myself as being more spiritual than everyone else. I made a point of remaining separate and aloof from the so-called "non-Christians," or "unbelievers." Not only was I critical and impatient toward those who did not walk the "straight and narrow," but I also condemned and denied my own humanity!

As a prisoner in a Florida State penitentiary (where I came to know Christ), I am forced to live and interact with men who are irreligious, unbelievers, atheists and indifferent to church and God. My involvement with them has taught me to appreciate the worth of a man in spite of outer appearances. I have learned that every person in my universe, even the most vile, is very important. When we reject or judge others as unworthy, we exclude them from making a valuable contribution to our lives. Many well-meaning Christians have been misled into rejecting their own humanity and that of others because of religious standards and traditions based on outer appearances.

In this article I will talk about my experience with an old, semi-invalid prisoner called Two-Step. There was nothing outwardly attractive about him, but as I focused on him as a person, not only did I find myself having compassion and patience, I sensed a sort of divine mysticism about him—a divine kinship with him—which I now sense in everyone I take time to know as a person!

It was quite cold that night, and the temperature in our dormitory was at an all-time low. A small group of inmates gathered around a small heater to begin our weekly Bible study class. Though we were fairly warm, I could not help noticing the discomfort of some of the other fellows who were situated on the far side of the dorm, away from the heater.

One of these whom I noticed shivering was an elderly, semi-invalid, nicknamed Two-Step. The nickname had been given to him by the other inmates because of his very slow manner of walking. Although I had seen Two-Step wandering around the prison compound for many months, I had never paid any particular attention to him. In addition to being unattractive, he never smiled, read, watched TV., or talked to anyone. In fact, he didn't engage in any sort of activity. All he did was walk to and from the dining hall for his meals, three times daily. He was so completely withdrawn that he went virtually unnoticed by everyone.

He paid no attention to us as we began our Bible discussion on that very cold evening. Occasionally someone in the group remarked that God was willing and ready to heal—ready to save the sinner—if he would repent and believe. Just before the class ended someone announced that we would pray for anyone who desired prayer. As the offer to pray for the sick was made, we cast our eyes in the direction of Two-Step. Though he was well aware of what was going on, he remained totally indifferent to us.

I found myself resenting Two-Step's indifference to us. But after the group had dispersed, I went over to him and asked if he would like a cup of hot coffee. He looked up at me, then quickly looked away, but made no reply. I went and returned with a cup of coffee, set it on the little table by his bed and left. Later, when I returned for the cup, I was pleased to see that it was empty.

The following morning, I again carried another cup of coffee to him, which he also drank. I continued to take the "coffee treat" to him for several weeks, and though he'd drink each cup, he would not speak a word. I increased thy gifts to include small items purchased at the inmate canteen and some religious literature which I tried to persuade him to read, but he still refused to respond.

After almost a year of ministering to Two-Step without any progress toward getting him to talk, I decided to give up. It was obvious that he needed friendly help and attention, but I felt there was little I could do to bring about any significant changes in his life, especially when there was no response from him.

As I thought about this, many questions came to my mind. Who was this man? Why didn't he talk? What did he know? How did he feel? And the biggest question of all, demanding an answer which I was unprepared to give; what is the worth of this man? Some years ago, I came across an item in a science magazine which stated that if a human being of average age and size were broken down into the various elements of which he is composed, his physical worth would be less than three dollars. Interesting—but what is a man really worth?

On the basis of his physical appearance, few in our society would take a second look at Two-Step. Who would bother with a decrepit semi-invalid, who didn't talk, could barely walk, who had no money or friends, and who had been in prison for thirty-five years, forgotten by the world from which he came?

As these factors gripped my mind, I struggled to withdraw my attention from him, and I suddenly realized that at no time during my small ministry to Two-Step had I really sought to know him as a person. I had never tried to understand him as a human being who, like *all* life, is very important to God the Creator.

My conscience was pricked and I could hardly wait for the morning to come so I could get back to my old buddy! When I took him his coffee, I was careful not to rush. I avoided any tendency toward routine, and though I didn't expect him to respond, I took special care to speak to him as a person. Instead of just rushing away as I had been doing, I deliberately stood there, appreciating and seeing Two-Step as a person—a real living, God-created human being.

He picked up the cup from the table and very slowly took a sip from it. I turned to walk away, happy and pleased with my new-found attitude toward the old man, but froze in my tracks when he said, "Thank you!"

I was astonished. Not only was his voice strong and his words clear, but he smiled as he spoke. I could not think of anything to say at that moment, so I remained silent.

Finally I said, "God bless you," and left.

During the next few weeks our communication increased, slowly developing into brief conversations. One morning after bringing him his coffee, I pulled up a chair and we started to talk. I began by asking him to tell me about himself. He cautioned me that he could not remember things well, but that he did recall some things about his past. He wept as he told, me about his youth.

He was born in New York, and came to Florida after his mother and step-father separated. He was only nineteen years old at that time. He could vaguely remember a struggle with his mother over a gun, and that she had been accidentally killed. The judge gave him a life sentence for second-degree murder. Shortly after his sentence began, he had a mental breakdown and was sent to the state mental hospital, where he remained for over twenty-five years.

As I listened to the old man tell of his ordeal and of the many abuses he had suffered during his thirty-five years in jail, I was thoroughly shaken and moved with compassion. I no longer saw Two-Step as he appeared physically—I saw him as a real person.

My friendship with Two-Step brought many problems. There were times I had to defend him against the less-sensitive inmates who would abuse or prey on him because of his age and disability.

The test of my spiritual strength came on Christmas Eve. In Florida, prisoners are given three dollars each year. The money is distributed on Christmas Eve in the form of canteen coupon books. After getting his coupon book, Two-Step apparently placed it on the table by his bed and fell asleep. Unable to resist the temptation, someone took it.

I was quite angry when I learned what had happened. I made a passionate plea to the fellows, whoever they were, to return the old man's three dollars, because it was the only time of year that he was ever given money. Since he had no family or friends, he never received letters or money from home. Christmas was the only time of the year that he received a gift. Not only did my pleas fall on deaf ears, but I was laughed at!

I replaced my feelings of indignation by recalling the days of my own consuming self-centeredness. I remembered my own past offenses to others and that I was forgiven. As I accepted the situation, my anger subsided, and I saw my offending fellow inmates as human beings like myself.

Almost a year had passed. As I walked across the compound to the prison chapel to attend the Friday night fellowship services, I was approached by a young fellow who lifted up his hand for me to stop. In a thick Hispanic accent, he said: "Mister Patterson, I very sorry." He repeated this several times, and I asked him to please tell me what he was talking about. With much difficulty he told me that it was he and another of his friends who had taken Two-Step's money. He wanted to know if I could forgive him!

After assuring him that I was happy to forgive him, I shared with him a bit of my newfound freedom in Christ. This not only helped him in his struggle for spiritual freedom, but again confirmed my faith in the eternal and divine worth of man.

So what is the worth of a man? Whether he be bond or free, sinner or saint, rich or poor, young or old—all bear some infinite gift of God, even if it's nothing more than the miracle of life!