

A Letter to Youth



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A Letter to Youth

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”—Romans 6:23.

Dear Friends:

In southeastern Minnesota, and sitting on the Wisconsin border line between the Mississippi River and a long shelf of bluffs, rests the little city of Red Wing. The population of this community is under 25,000; and the city itself has a great historical significance, as it was here that the Indian maiden leaped off a high bluff to her death upon learning her lover had died. This spot is the world-famous lovers leap, and thousands come each year to view the area.

Red Wing is also a shoe—pottery center, for it is here that the world-famous Red Wing shoes are made, and also the likewise famous, and expensive Red Wing pottery is made. And yet with all these famous landmarks and industries, if you would ask a Minnesotan about Red Wing, he would tell you that the city is known for something else. You see, the city also houses the Minnesota State Training School. Training school is the state term for it, but to the people of Minnesota it is called the reform school.

Now this reform school isn't what a person would normally imagine a place of this sort to be. It has no fence around it at all, and

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the grounds, well-kept and groomed to perfection, give the appearance of a private school campus. There are quite a few three or four story cottages scattered throughout the area where the inmates are housed; and each cottage is under the responsibility of a married couple, more commonly known as house parents. Also in the main campus area is a new school and library building, and further on down the line is another large building which houses around 14 shops—a trailer shop, print shop, woodworking shop, laundry and dry cleaning shop, etc. There the boys can begin to learn a trade or find an interest in life that would lead them into an honest profession.

A short way up the walk from the shop building is the main office, dining room, hospital and disciplinary quarters, all under one roof. Also, on the grounds are several private homes for the officials of the school, and far off to the south side of the grounds are the school garden and livestock barns. All these things make up this particular reform school, and yet it still isn't complete. What makes it complete are the boys committed there by the courts for their crimes; crimes ranging from refusal to go to school, to theft, and yes, even murder. The boys range in age from 8 to 18; and the length of stay is usually 11 months, although some stay for years. Those inmates who have families willing to sign for them usually are paroled after this 11 months' stay, provided of course, they remain on good behavior during this 11 months. The majority of the boys make their parole, but a good number end up right back into trouble and returned to the institution for another 11 months' stay.

In my own life I do not come by the remembering of dates very easily, but there is one date I don't believe I'll ever forget. On September 3, 1948, at the age of 13 years, I entered this reform school for the first of three separate stays there. It was late in the

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afternoon, possibly 5 p.m., when I arrived here this first time; and if you imagine that I was afraid, be very assured that I truly was. No matter how bright or cheery you make out a training school, reformatory, or prison proper to be, it will still not do the institution justice; for there is no getting around it; a prison is a prison, and quite a terrible place to live. If it doesn't scare you, it should; it should literally make you tremble even to pass by such a place on a visit.

But this first day for me wasn't a visit. I was here to stay and for how long I knew not. I had been taken from my mother early that morning, placed into a car with a court-appointed probation officer, and driven the 200 plus miles to the school. Don't get the idea either that I didn't deserve to be committed here, for if anything, it should have been done years before. I had been a terrible child, forever getting into one scrape after another. Staying away from school, running away from home, theft—anything named trouble and there I'd be. But now I was in a reform school, and believe me I knew it would be no picnic—nor was it!

During my years here the average population ran from between 300 to 350 inmates, and I have since heard that in the following years another hundred has been added to this average. The boys come from all over the state, and each one committed here by the courts for their respective crimes.

I mentioned earlier that I had three separate stays at the Red Wing school, and it was during my third stay that I was committed by the courts to a more secure institution. I was 16 years old at the time and had run away from the training school twice within a two-week period, in the process stealing several cars and breaking into a number of business establishments. This so-called step up the ladder to a new prison was to St. Cloud, Minnesota and the state

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reformatory. This particular prison is known as the Gray Stone College, and no school of hard knocks is better named. To compare it to Red Wing is impossible, for the difference between the two is as night is to day. The first thing that strikes you as you enter the grounds is the wall. It is made of huge gray granite blocks and rises 22 feet into the air, and you later learn that it also extends 10 feet into the ground. Spaced every so often atop this wall is a small guard to keep check on four different sides. As you ride by, you see a man in a dark blue uniform watching your approach from one of those towers, and in his hand rests a high-powered rifle. To the arriving inmate he doesn't look very nice, but then no officer of the law ever looked nice to any criminal, in prison or out.

From here you go through the front gate and into the main building. You are looked upon with cruel contempt. You force yourself to appear tough and indifferent, but deep down within, you are afraid and shaking as the wall and five steel doors have brought the realization that this is no training school—this is a prison in the very best sense, and you have been sentenced here for five years of your life. A 16-year-old boy trying to play tough has finally been treated as an adult, and now he finds himself not so tough anymore and wishing he hadn't been so eager to grow up.

Inside the prison there are five cell houses—A, B, C, D, and E. Each cell house contains four tiers of cells with 20 cells per tier and two sides of tiers on each house. There are a number of dorms in different areas of the prison also, but these spots are reserved for the trustees or a group of low I.Q. inmates called D.D.'s (defective delinquents—state name). The cells themselves are very small and contain only the necessities. Upon entering, you are placed on an induction tier in B-house, where for one week you go through a series of medical examinations, shots, etc. You are kept segregated

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as much as possible this first seven days so that any disease you may have contracted on the outside will not, should such show up, spread throughout the prison to the other inmates. They claim that the first 30 days in any prison are the toughest, and in part this claim is true. But let me tell you here and now that in prison every day is tough, and I have yet to find a prison that is enjoyable to stay in, or a person being in prison claiming they liked it there. All of them, both men and women alike, will tell you that a prison is a hell on earth; and you can take the word of a man who has spent a total of almost ten years behind the bars of training schools, reformatories, and prisons—it is a hell on earth.

The St. Cloud reformatory contained from 900 to 1000 inmates, and their ages ranged from 16 to 70. I was one of the youngest inmates when first committed to St. Cloud; but after I'd been there a little over a year, an even younger boy of 15 arrived at the prison. His crime? In a fit of temper at being told he could not go down town one Sunday afternoon, he took his rifle and proceeded to kill his grandmother, grandfather (with whom he was staying), and lastly his sister. The crimes of the men at St. Cloud were actually no different compared to those of the inmates at Red Wing, only bigger and more vicious. To show you how an individual starts out with first a little crime and then progresses to bigger and more hurtful crimes, I'd like now to attempt to give you a thumb-nail sketch of how I started and right on up to my present life. Crime in many respects is a bad habit. You steal something small, get away without getting caught, and the success of these first small ventures makes you brave and bold to go on to bigger things, until it becomes a habit for you to steal and ruins your life.

In my life, as I remember back, my first recollection of theft was empty soda pop and milk bottles from neighbors' yards in the

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area of where I lived in my home town. These bottles brought money at the local stores, and the people I took them from never questioned a couple of them missing. I doubt very much they even knew the number of bottles they possessed and didn't even realize somebody was stealing them. Anyway, here I was making my few nickels and dimes and not getting caught. Success was taking its hold on me, and eventually these nickels and dimes began to not be enough.

During World War II many things were in very great demand to the general public, as things were quite hard to get. Two of these greatest things in demand were inner tubes for automobile tires and anti-freeze. In my roving one day, I happened upon a garage where I discovered a good supply of inner tubes and cases of Prestone antifreeze. I thought I'd be smart and not take it all, for then it would be noticed. Instead, I decided to take a little at a time, figuring in that way it wouldn't be missed. Almost every service station in town would go wild for an inner tube or gallon of Prestone, and never a question would be asked. So here I progressed to my bigger money by stealing a tire tube or can of anti-freeze and selling them at \$5.00 a piece at several local service stations. But this time there was a change in my success, for here I got caught. My smartness at feeling a few items now and then wouldn't be missed was, as you can imagine, not very smart after all. So did I go to jail? No, I only received a sound talking to from the chief of police and my parents.

I remember some time later where three other boys and myself worked all night stealing empty cases of beer bottles from behind a local tavern in town and put them into the basement of an unused building a half block away. These empty cases brought us 50 cents apiece at a number of places around town, and this night we took over 200 cases. Several days later we were caught once again, this

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time taking a wagon load of these cases to trade in for money. I had gone back to bottles again but in a much greater scale than the few soda pop and milk bottles previous to this. Can you see this step by step climb from small things to bigger things? The chains are becoming harder and harder to break, especially when all we again received was another talking to from the police and our parents.

The crime that brought me to the training school at Red Wing was the breaking in of the national guard armory. Another group of boys and I broke the door down to the gun room and then broke the locks off the gun racks and made off with a large amount of arms. These arms ranged from rifles to pistols and was topped off by a bazooka and two shells. It's a wonder we weren't killed, for we tried to fire all the guns; but by the mercy of God the firing pins on every gun had been removed and placed in the armory safe, which we could neither move nor enter. The Lord was truly watching over a sinful group of boys those few days.

Well, coming home from Red Wing, cars were the rage, and you happened to be a sissy if you didn't steal a car now and then for a joy ride. As you can imagine, I wasn't going to be a sissy. I was a good bit younger in age than the other boys of the group I went around with, but a fantastic growth in my early life left me standing six feet two inches tall and weighing over 200 pounds before my 13th birthday. So, though I was younger, I was still bigger in size than any of the others were. And yet this difference in age still pressed me, and I felt I must prove myself to be accepted. So, in my warped frame of mind, I felt I must be braver and bolder than the others; and if they stole one car a week, I'd steal two. If they broke into one store, I'd break into two stores. There again the Lord was watching over us, for several times we'd be in accidents with these stolen cars for going too fast or driving recklessly. One night in

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particular that I remember was when four of us were in a stolen car being chased by the police. We turned a corner much too fast and smashed into three parked cars before coming to rest up against a tree. I was the last one out of the accident, and running away from the scene, I cut through a yard and down a back alley. A block away someone stepped out of the shadows of a garage and pointed a gun at me. I dove to the ground hollering and then learned that the party with the gun was none other than my buddy who had driven the car. He, thinking I was a policeman chasing him, was ready to use his gun; and by the grace of God neither of us was hurt in what could have been a very sad ending for both him and myself. Quite a night's deeds for a couple of boys aged 18 and 15. Did we learn anything from this experience? I'll answer you this by telling you that a few blocks away we stole another car. How tough we thought we were!

After spending four years and three months at St. Cloud, I was paroled, but within a few years I was back in crime. Only now the soda pop and milk bottles had progressed to forgery and fraud. Because of some family problems I was too weak to face up to, I decided to leave the state of Minnesota. But this took money, so I put this chosen profession of mine to work once again. I sold a car I owned, but which had been financed for full value. I also cashed \$1600 worth of bad checks over an eight-hour period. With these proceeds I left my home in Minnesota and settled for two years in the state of California; but once again crime had me on the go, and the end of my road came in the state of Louisiana, where I murdered a man in attempted robbery. From a few bottles to death row, I await my execution for this murder. What price crime? I'll let you answer this yourself.

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Of course, this isn't the whole picture; for to tell everything in detail would be next to impossible. All the car thefts, all the break-ins, all the bricks through store windows and running away with the goods from display cases, all the false checks cashed, plus a thousand and one other things is one side. The other side takes in the tears and heartbreak suffered by your loved ones, to say nothing of the tears, grief, and heartbreak suffered by those who have been the butt of this theft, this damage to property, and taking of a human life.

What causes people to do these things; to rob, to cheat, and yes, to even place themselves in a situation where a human life is lost because of their deeds? Well, society has been asking this self-same question from the beginning of time, and the answers are as many and as varied as the crimes themselves. To attempt to place the cause on all of it is again an impossible task, but let me leave with you a few impressions of one who has traveled this wrong side and seen the workings of men and crime.

To begin with, let me say that society does not owe anyone a living. Too many feel that because of some bad break in life they should be allowed to sit back and let society support them, or condone their actions. Others look for an excuse to claim this bad break simply because they are lazy. The prisons of this world have always been filled with men, women, and children who are lazy. They don't know the meaning of the word work; they are afraid of it, and have very bad work habits. A standard prison joke makes the statement that I'm not afraid of work, for I'll lie down and go to sleep next to it any time. The sad part of this is that it is a fact to a great many, and being so, they look for an easy way to obtain their desires and thereby fall into crime.

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Others are looking for a quick dollar and feel they can't find it anywhere except through taking it from someone who has it. And, no matter what, they always have an excuse to justify their actions to themselves. I know, because I excused myself many times. Society does not owe you, nor me, nor anyone a living; it's the other way around, as we owe it to society to live the best possible lives we can that are pure and Christlike. So many have a chip on their shoulder; and if you dig into their reasons for truth, you'll usually find that the chip is merely their crutch for self-sympathy.

Then comes the person who deals in showing off, and who likes to believe he looks big in everybody's eyes. The sad fact here is that they are only big in their own eyes and inflated ego. This pride receives a huge boost when they can drive around in a flashy car, sport a big roll of bills, wear classy clothes, and act the part of a tough guy. But as is always the case, such pride doesn't seem to be able to work for this false front; so they revert to crime and theft to reach their goal. Pride is a terrible crime in itself and has been the cause of countless thousands to taste the bitterness of prison life. But even greater loss are the souls lost to hell because of pride. I dare say that the devil's greatest weapon in his battle for the soul of man is pride, and only through Christ Jesus can man become victorious over this sin.

We also have the individual who thinks himself smart enough, too smart in fact, to make an honest living, so he also reverts to crime and tries to outwit the law. But in the end he always gets caught (as does every criminal); and when you speak to him, he's got a hundred excuses for why he got caught, and a thousand more for why he shouldn't be in prison. In fact, if you asked 1,000 inmates in every prison on the face of this world today, you'd find 995 giving you so-called logical excuses why they shouldn't be in

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prison. Most criminals upon getting caught have no conception of their crimes and feel that society should just release them and forget about their deeds as a bad deal. This is not a mental deficiency on the part of the law breaker, for he knows exactly what he's done. But his personal reasoning is that it's all a mistake this time, so let's just forget about it and let him go on his merry way—to again commit some crime, and most always more harmful than before.

Then we have another type called the thrill seeker, and this class usually always falls to the younger generation, the teenagers. This isn't necessarily just today's teenagers either. It was the same during my teens, and it will probably be the same with teenagers when you yourselves are grandparents. Each generation of teenagers has had its special name, from the hipsters and bopsters after the war, to the beat generation of yesterday, and on up to what is now called the restless generation. These young adults are doing just about the same thing as the previous generations have done—stealing cars to go joy riding, robbing stores for kicks, drinking whiskey and making believe they're sophisticated adults, and right on down to rolling drunks. But now something new has been added—the thrill of dope. Actually it's not new but has shown a marked increase the past ten years in teen-age narcotics users. Dope has many forms and many names, with probably the most appropriate being “hell flower.” What harm can come from just one thrill or one little kick, they say. I'll tell you what harm—the same harm as stealing a few bottles and getting away with it that eventually ends up as attempted robbery and murder—the harm of habit and sin. False courage is a terrible thing; and the thrill seeker, having the first taste of this courage, finds it easier and easier to let the barrier down each succeeding time to where it tends to grow on them and becomes a living part of the thrill seeker. Then try to break it—try to stop it, and the devil laughs at you for your folly. I wish

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every youngster in this world today could take a good look at a narcotics user during a withdrawal period as they are coming off dope. The sight is so revolting and sickening, that I'd be safe to say not another ounce of dope would ever be sold illegally in the world. I wish every youngster in this world, before he took his first drink, could see a drunkard with the D.T.'s, cowering in a corner for fear of snakes, or rats, or bats that aren't there. To them it's real, because drink has warped their minds and caused them to literally see things that aren't there. Could you see it, you'd never touch a drop of liquor as long as you lived. I wish every youngster, before they stole the first car for a joy ride, or went with someone in a stolen car just for the thrill of a joy ride, could see the accident and bodies of another group of thrill seekers who crashed their stolen car by going too fast, or running from the police—teenagers killed seeking a thrill, looking for some kicks. What a degrading waste it all is! And I wish you could see it all. I have, and let me assure you it's revolting to the point of sickness within a person. So where does it all end for the smart man, the man with a chip on his shoulder, the lazy man, the man who feels the world owes him a living, the thrill seeker? I'll tell you where it ends—in prisons, in mental institutions, in graveyards, in heartbreak. But even more than this, it ends with the devil in hell. So if you are this day seeking that easy living, or feeling too smart, or planning to go out for some kicks with the gang, I implore you to stop and come to a realization of where your deeds will take you. False values and false loyalties will lead you to destruction and to hell, believe me. The prisons of the world are today full of people with these false loyalties and values in life. They worship money, dope, or a drink, and they are only loyal to the ends and means which bring them these goods. Are you going to be one of them? Are you going to throw your lives away simply because of a false and sinful pride, a thrill?

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You know, the true courage in life today is the same as it has always been. This is the courage to take your life and live it in dedication to Christ. There is no thrill in life other than this, and those that say there is, speak with the tongue of the devil. I know, because I've lived both sides of it; and the only thing I've found to have meaning, depth, and lastingness to me is the courage it takes to live for Christ and the thrill I get doing it. Praise the Lord!

We are all here on this earth for a purpose, and that purpose is to serve Christ. Anything that hinders us from doing this makes our lives valueless to both Christ and humanity. In serving Christ we serve humanity, for Christ came into the world to be crucified for the sins of man, so that man through Him might be saved. And in serving Him we must follow Him and seek to lead to salvation those that are lost. This is how He wants us to serve Him—not with the seekers of thrills in a bottle, cigarettes, dope, or speeding in a stolen car that ends up in an accident and human life lost. We owe our lives to Christ for His salvation to us, and we owe it to humanity and to ourselves to live the kind of life He would have us live. But you say, “How can I, a teenager, serve God; and how can I serve humanity in the process?” Well, when you serve God, you automatically serve humanity, because your life for Christ will so shine, that others will see Christ in you and be inspired to a like life. I'm sure that when you pause to think of it, you'll find that the people you admire most are the people you see living for Christ. That truly is the only life.

You also owe it to Christ, humanity, and yourself to prepare yourself to do the best possible job in all that you do. So many young people today are leaving school and not completing their education. These drop-outs are harmful, for it puts stumbling blocks in your path that need not be, and should not be there. The old cliché of today's young people being tomorrow's leaders is not as trite as it

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may sound. The opportunities for youth are today far greater than they have ever before been. The responsibility of youth even surpasses the field of opportunities. But to take advantage of these opportunities, youth must prepare and be ready to meet and accept the responsibilities the world places on them. Wherever you turn now days, you are faced by the stress of humanity asking and pushing you to prepare yourself for the future; and you yourselves will someday be a part of this push as you try to prepare your own children. You are no good to God, man, or yourself unless you stand up and meet the challenge before you. To serve God, you must accept him; and as his child, he expects your very best. Mold your life in His image, and there you shall find your thrill, your glory, and your salvation. When others try to lead you into the so-called thrills of the world, just pause a minute and think back to the life of one young man who started out stealing soda pop and milk bottles and ended up on death row for murder. Think of it; let it seep into your inner being to make you sick. Then get down on your knees and seek your thrill in the only place it can be had—the cross of Calvary and the shed blood of our Savior Jesus. God be with you.

Yours in Christian love,

Wayne Turner

