

*31 “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. 32All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, 33and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. 34Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ 37Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? 38And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? 39And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ 40And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’ 41Then he will say to those at his left hand, ‘You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; 42for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, 43I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ 44Then they also will answer, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ 45Then he will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ 46And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*

It was not a front-page picture but buried back, opposite the editorials. I never would have taken note of the picture were it not for her legs. Long legs dangling from the harness that held her. Skin stretched over bone is what I saw. No fat, not even the tiniest muscle visible – just skin and bones and the words beneath the picture:

In my mind I heard Jesus’ words: I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat.

What if she is my judge on the last day?

“I was hungry,” Jesus said. Is he saying, “I was she.”?

Friday afternoon I did my prison visit for the month. Once a month I go down to the Grafton Correctional Institution and visit my match. One more visit with him and he will be released. I told him I will pick him up – take him to the halfway house in Akron. On the way I will see that he gets a coat for the winter and some boots. When he turns in his prison garb when he is released he will have no winter coat or boots. Nor car nor driver’s license, nor job. This January will be a tough time for him to be getting out – not a lot of employers are looking for someone with a felony conviction.

I will help him a little – probably not enough to really make a difference though. I have had other matches – given a ride home to one, took another right into my closet at home, gave him my new shoes. I stayed in touch with my first match for a few years until he started guessing what I might make each year and what my home might be worth. I took that to mean that he wanted more from me and we drifted apart.

It is a very complicated to help someone.

When I saw the picture of the skin and bones girl it was as if Jesus was shouting at me: How can you walk by and not love?

Jesus, give me an amount that I should pay to cover my obligation to her and to all hungry children. Jesus, tell me what I should do for my friend in prison. Tell me what it takes Jesus, to buy my salvation.

Jesus answered my question with these words: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.”

Love.

Love is what God requires of you and me.

In the parable Jesus told everyone is before the throne of the Son of Man. The sheep will be told that when he was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, sick or in prison they reached out to him. The sheep will ask when they did anything for him. He will tell them that when they did it to the least of his family, they did it to him.

They did not know. All along they had been feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger, visiting those who were sick and those who were in prison and they had no idea they were doing it for Jesus.

They did not let their left hand know what their right hand was doing.

In their minds I think they were just doing what humans were created to do.

Love.

And the others – those who are cut off from Jesus forever? I think they had been going to church all along and thought they were doing lots of things for Jesus. But there was no love in them. Maybe they spoke in heavenly tongues, and had prophetic powers and understood all mysteries and had great faith and gave huge amounts of their wealth to support the church – even gave up their whole life for Jesus. But they did not love enough to give to those in need.

This is a terrible story for religious people – for me and maybe for you. There is no way to save ourselves. We can do all the right things but if we do not have love we gain nothing. That is what the apostle Paul said.

But think of what this parable means for people in need. Jesus not only loves them but will judge us all by our love for them. If that will not get food for the hungry and a welcome for the stranger what will?

And me in my poverty of love? Is there any hope?

I trust that Jesus has loved me and you – gave his life for those who are poor in love. I trust that his love will be enough to save us.

Do you think Jesus is powerful enough to take a loveless person like me and make me into a loving person like him? I hope so.

And I hope the same for you.

A pastor named Brian Stoffreggen shared this idea: Maybe God does not love us as we are but loves what God will be able to make of us through Jesus. Maybe that is what God is trying to do with me and with you: make us into people who love.

If so I hope Jesus gets his way with us. We sure will be different if he does. Amen.