

HEARTS OF FLESH OR HEARTS OF STONE?

By Andrew Wilson
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Matthew 25: 34-40
1 Timothy 6:17-19

Happy Mother's Day! Moms and grandmothers, we love you. I hope your husbands and kids have something fun planned for you.

I remember a few years ago my dad was here for Mother's Day and I asked him where we were meeting for dinner. Without a hint of irony he said: "I don't know Andy – your mother makes all those arrangements."

You mothers and grandmothers teach us lots of important things, but the most important thing you teach is compassion. With gentle words, you soften our hearts. Through gracious deeds you show us what it means to be kind. What would we men do without you mothers and grandmothers? It's a scary thought. We need you to remind us why we're here. As Rudyard Kipling observed, "God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers."

Compassion begins at home. That's the first vital lesson you moms teach us. Step one in learning to love like Jesus is learning to love our bratty brother or our bossy grandmother. If we don't learn how to love those closest to us, we'll never learn how to love our neighbor.

That has the makings of a solid Mother's Day message. Our family is a school of love and our moms – and of course, our dads too – are the teachers. But today I want to talk about something different. I want to talk about the love we show – or maybe fail to show – to people outside our circle of family and friends.

Jesus has a lot to say about that kind of love. His teachings are clear and peppered with good examples. In Luke, chapter 6 he asks his disciples: "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them" (Luke 6:32). Jesus isn't saying we shouldn't love our family and friends. He's saying that people who love God won't love *only* their family and friends.

Jesus continues: "And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great and you will be children of the Most High" (Luke 6:34-35).

Jesus' commandment to love your enemies is radical. It defies worldly logic. It contradicts the interpretation of the Law that had been passed down by the Jews over many centuries. But Jesus is revealing something vitally important about the universe. He's lifting up the very highest form of love. It's love on the level of the PhD. If we're truly in tune with God's heart, we'll love people as he does.

That means our love for others will have no limitations. We'll love even our enemies – we'll love even those who hate us and seek to do us harm. We'll seek to bless them knowing full well that they will probably continue to curse us.

Teachings like that one sometimes frighten us. They cause us to doubt ourselves. We wonder: Who among us can love like that? Only a small minority of saints have hearts so big that they can bless their enemies. We need to understand the context of Jesus' teaching. He's not laying out all the things we have to do if we want to be part of God's Kingdom. In other words, he's not telling us how to score points with God. Rather, Jesus is describing the kind of character that God *wants us* to have, and the kind of character we who love God finally *will* have when his kingdom is fully established.

The point is: we shouldn't allow ourselves to be frightened by the Lord's teachings or intimidated by the high standards of God's kingdom. Instead, all of this should inspire us to ask a simple question: "What baby steps can I take – right now – that will help me grow in the character of Jesus?"

Thankfully, Jesus provides plenty of guidance for us. (And by the way, what he has to say has been confirmed by every good mom down through the ages.) He tells us we should do what we can for those who are hurting. Who does Jesus have in mind? We don't have to guess about that – Jesus tells us quite explicitly who deserves our attention. His list includes those who are friendless, sick or in prison. It includes those who have been neglected, abused or pushed aside. It includes the poorest of the poor. The Lord calls us to pay attention to such people – to put them on our radar screen and keep them there. He doesn't expect us to solve all of their problems. He calls us simply to do what we can with the limited resources and influence available to us to lift them up or bring them some relief. Any effort we make to do that is a baby step in the right direction. It's a baby step in the direction of becoming more like Jesus.

Have you ever noticed what happens in the church when we talk about helping the poor? Almost invariably, the conversation turns to questions about how to respond to homeless people begging on street corners or in parking lots. Should we give them money? What if they spend it on drugs or cigarettes? Is it better to give protein bars or maybe gift certificates to Burger King?

Those questions are important. At the very least, we need to pay attention to people living on the streets. We should them the respect of acknowledging their presence, engaging with them in conversation, and offering a smile or a prayer.

By the way, speaking of protein bars, my wife keeps a stash of them in her car so she'll have something to give to people who are homeless. I know that because I raid her stash whenever I feel the slightest concern that I might miss a meal.

I bring all of this up to make a wider point. The wider point is that, when it comes to our personal response to poverty, our focus tends to be curiously narrow.

Think of it this way. There are hundreds of thousands of extraordinarily poor people living within 20 miles of us. The schools in their neighborhoods are sub-standard. Many are living hand-to-mouth in over-priced, over-crowded apartment buildings. Crime rates in their neighborhoods are alarmingly high. The schools in their neighborhoods are sub-standard. The challenges for close-by churches like ours are huge. We understand that reality. We understand, furthermore, that the problem of poverty outside of our country is far worse. Worldwide, more than a billion people are struggling to live on less than \$2 per day. We all understand that by partnering with any number of Christian ministries or NGOs, we can make a huge difference for some of those people.

Yet where do our minds go when we talk about our response to the poor? We think of the few people we encounter each week, in our tiny circle of life, who are begging on the streets. More to the point, we think of our own feelings of guilt, and of how uncomfortable we feel as we try to decide whether to pull \$2 out of our wallet, or surrender the sandwich from our lunch, or just keep walking. We don't talk about the thousands who are suffering in the micro-communities all around us. We don't contemplate the vast opportunities God has given us to leverage our resources for the poor and the oppressed.

I'm not sure how to diagnose what's going on. We've never had more information about the world around us. Every day we hear stories about the struggles of low income people in our region. Moreover, we who live in the suburbs have never been richer. The range of opportunities open to most of us boggles the mind. Yet this rising tide of information and wealth has not prompted robust action. It hasn't led to an increase in generosity. It hasn't caused us to think more deeply and creatively about we might help the poor. To the contrary, it has only served to dull our sensibilities. It has only magnified our tendency towards narcissism and self-promotion.

Back in Jesus's day the vast majority of people were poor. In fact, throughout all of human history, right up the turn of the nineteenth century, more than 90 percent of people worldwide were living in what we would regard as extreme poverty. Their houses were tiny. The floors of their homes were dirt. Of course they had no electricity. They also had no running water, and a much of the water they carried home was contaminated with nasty microbes. They cooked over fires in dark, smoky rooms. Their diet included little meat and very few fruits or green vegetables. Schools catered only to the rich. Most people were illiterate. Hospitals were almost unheard of. Opportunities for women and girls were severely limited. A large proportion of rich people got that way by exploiting slaves.

It's important to keep all of that in mind when you read the Lord's words in the 25th chapter of Matthew: "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me" (Matthew 25: 35-36).

Jesus identifies himself in this passage with each of the hurting people that he mentions – the one who was hungry, the one who was thirsty, and so on. In doing so, Jesus reveals to us three vitally important truths.

The first truth has to do with the Lord's heart. He's telling us that he has a special love for people who have been pushed aside by the world. Christ loves us all, but he has a special regard for the poor and the oppressed. He stands with them in solidarity and friendship.

That simple word of assurance has sustained hundreds of millions of marginalized Christians over the past two millennia. It has inspired them to proclaim with Paul, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31).

The second truth has to do with our priorities. We who've been blessed in worldly terms need to get in line with the priorities Jesus establishes in Matthew 25. That means lifting up those who are lowest, and empowering those who are least. More than that, it means recognizing that our wealth has been entrusted to us by God so that we'll use it to grow his kingdom.

The third truth has to do with our relationships with people who are suffering. Jesus tells us that when we help such people, we're helping him. That's how closely he identifies with them. That's how much he loves them.

This revelation provides us with a straightforward answer to the question: Why should we serve those in need? The answer is: Because we love Christ. We don't do it for a thank-you. We don't do it because it's fun – even though it's usually way more fun than we think it's going to be. And we certainly don't do it so that other people will applaud us and pat us on the back. We serve those in need because, as we do so, we lift up the Lord Jesus.

Mother Teresa was often asked what motivated her to serve the poorest of the poor. This response was typical for her:

I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself, this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him. I serve because I love Jesus.

I used to think that provided enough of a reason to motivate us: we serve the poor simply because we love Jesus. That sounded wonderfully pious and holy and right-minded. It was only after many years of serving among the very poor that I came to understand how wrong I was. Yes, we serve because we love Jesus, but *we also serve because we love the ones we serve*. Our love for Jesus should be accompanied by genuine love for those whom he loves. The two should blossom together. I think that's part of what Jesus is signaling to us when he says, "When you did it for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

We would never come right out and say that only God could love the very poor. That would obviously be patronizing and condescending. But that's what we communicate to people, at least indirectly, when we say we serve the poor because we love Jesus. Wouldn't it be better to say that we serve the poor because they're loved by God and created in his image? Wouldn't it be more helpful to set a goal of

loving people as Jesus does? Wouldn't it be more honest to admit that, while we often find it hard to love the stranger, we're working at it?

Sometimes it takes a spiritual superstar— a Mother Teresa — to see Jesus in another person. But we all have the ability to love those who are hurting. We can cook a meal or offer a cup of cold water. We take care of someone who is sick or visit someone in prison. We can babysit for a single mom. We can drive a shut-in to a doctor's appointment. We can mentor an at-risk child. We can drive to Mexico to help build an orphanage, or fly to the Dominican Republic to organize health clinics for Haitian cane cutters.

We can all take baby steps towards the goal of loving like Jesus.

I want to end today by giving you a pop quiz. I'm going to ask you four multiple-choice questions relating to world-wide poverty. I think it's important for us, as Christians, to have at least a general sense of the challenges we face in combatting extreme poverty. So we're going to project the questions on the screen and give you time in silence to answer them. You might want to jot down your answers so you can determine your score when I give you the correct answers.

And don't worry: I'm not going to ask you to tell us how you did.

QUESTION 1: In all low-income countries across the world today, how many girls finish primary school?

- A. 20 percent
- B. 40 percent
- C. 60 percent

QUESTION 2: In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has...

- A. ...almost doubled
- B. ...remained more or less the same
- C. ...almost halved

QUESTION 3: How many of the world's 1 year old children today have been vaccinated against some disease?

- A. 20 percent
- B. 50 percent
- C. 80 percent

QUESTION 4: Worldwide, 30-year-old men have spent 10 years in school, on average. How many years have women of the same age spent in school?

- A. 9 years
- B. 6 years

— C. 3 years

The answer to question 1 is C. In all low-income countries across the world, 60 percent of girls finish primary school.

The answer to question 2 is C. In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has almost been cut in half.

The answer to question 3 is C. 80 percent of the world's 1-year-old children have been vaccinated against some disease.

And the answer to question 4 is A. Worldwide 30-year-old women have spent an average of 9 years in school. Adult women worldwide have spent nearly as much time in school as men of the same age.

If you're like most smart, educated, internet-connected people in the world today, you probably got at least 3 if not all 4 of those questions wrong. We can assume that because of the extensive testing that has been done by the man who wrote those questions, Hans Rosling. When it comes to their understanding of world poverty, most of us have an excessively negative view of the world. We haven't kept up with the vast changes that have taken place across our world.

We don't understand, for example, that the number of people living in extreme poverty has never been lower. Or that 80 percent of people worldwide now have access to electricity. Or that the number of girls who receive a basic education has been rising dramatically. Or that, as a proportion of the world population, fewer people are dying because of wars or violent crime or natural disasters than ever before.

By the way, if you're interested in learning more, you might read Hans Rosling's remarkable book, *Factfulness*. Rosling's core message is that, in terms of the material well-being of our planet's 7 billion inhabitants, things are way better than we think they are.

Why am I telling you this? In part because it's Mother's Day and we need to end with a smile. But my main goal today is to wake you up. It's to get you excited about the mission Jesus has given to you of helping those who are being left behind. The situation is not hopeless. Things are improving in ways that no one could have predicted even 20 years ago. But it's still true that more than a billion people worldwide are living on less than \$2 a day.

Today, for the first time in history, the goal of eliminating the most extreme forms of poverty may be within reach. More than a billion people today align themselves with the church of Jesus Christ. If only a quarter of those people got serious about the task, extreme poverty and the misery it creates could become a thing of the past. It could happen within the lifetime of today's young adults. We Christians have the resources. We have the know-how. We have the necessary partnerships and networks of

support. The only question that remains is this: Do we dare to love as Christ loves? Will we allow our hearts to be broken for his sake, and for the sake of those still living in the shadows?

I'll end with a story. It's a simple story and it won't take long. Back in the late 1980s I took my first mission trip. I visited Nicaragua for 10 days with a group of Presbyterians. We didn't do anything for the people. We just interviewed people about the political situation and tried to understand why so many people were so wretchedly poor. One day I was walking by myself along a beach and I came across two young girls. Their clothes were filthy; their hair was disheveled; but they were radiantly beautiful. They had with them a five gallon plastic bucket and I asked them what they were doing. They let me look inside. It was half full of rice and other scraps of food they had picked out of a nearby trash dump. They were heading home to give it to their mom.

They let me take their picture. Even a sinner like me could see the Lord's face in their lovely faces. That picture hung in my study for many years. It has since been replaced by pictures of friends from the Dominican Republic. I kept it on the wall in front of my desk to remind me of our calling – a calling that is summarized so graciously by Paul in his instructions to his protégé, Timothy:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth... Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

Gracious God, you have created us to be instruments of your love. We want to glorify you in all we do, and to make the best possible use of the gifts you've given us.

Help us not only to empathize with people who are suffering, but also to do what we can to lift them up. The opportunities before us are huge. Inspire your Church to stand with the very poor, and to work towards that day when no one in your world is friendless, homeless or hungry.

We pray in Christ's name.

Amen.