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What do we do about prison inmates after their release?

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NCR Today

A friend of mine got a letter from a prisoner in Delano, Calif. My friend is 93, active and generous. She answered the first letter, but doesn't know what to do now.

The letter is marked "Inmate Indigent Mail," so I suppose the state of California paid for it. The inmate was at risk of a 42-year sentence, but he says he put himself in God's hands and the prosecutor offered him release in March 2014.

"So I'm seeking a place where God can use me for free," he writes. "I'm willing to do anything -- for the first time in my life to leave my past with the devil. I ask you to guide me to whatever group that your heart feels I need. This will be done by the prayer to Jesus Christ." (I added the punctuation and corrected some spelling.)

I don't know how to answer him any more than my friend does. I looked him up on the California inmate locator. He's 47 and arrived at the North Kern State Prison in December 2012. Maybe it was a transfer from another institution.

I could suggest he write to the United Farm Workers in Delano and ask for a job when he gets out. I don't know if he's able to do farm labor. I don't know if California will send him back to wherever he was arrested for his crime. I don't know if he is getting re-entry services from the prison system or if there are community services out there. I'm guessing California is willing to pay the postage on his letter in the hope he can find help somewhere. It's a small investment in the kindness of strangers.

On Monday, a man in his 20s asked me for money in the grocery store. He has three convictions and was just released again after he served the full six-year sentence, so he has no parole services -- though there's the question whether he didn't get parole because of gangster behavior in prison. I gave him \$5 and some

advice on where to look for a job washing dishes. So he asked me for more money. But I had done what I could. And when I drove out of the parking lot, I locked my car doors.

I understand the impulse James warns us against: Goodbye and good luck. Stay warm and well-fed. The guy whom I met said he slept under a set of stairs. Well, he's young, I tell myself. But I know what little help is out there for these men. We who claim to be a Christian society have created a cruel society where there's no place even to bury a dead terrorist, much less feed and shelter living sinners. Lucky for us, our worst sins aren't known.

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