



The EXTENT of Our Compa\$\$ion

BY JACOB
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This past Sunday, a familiar face came to our church and asked me to help pay her hotel bill again. It had been a while since I had seen her. This woman, her daughter, and her son-in-law had been staying at an inexpensive hotel for several months. Each time she came by I'd follow her to the hotel and pay the bill. But this past time I said, "I can't help you today." Part of the reason was that I couldn't leave at that moment, but part of the reason was because I was wondering if I was enabling them more than helping them. Plus, there was a sinking feeling of frustration because I highly suspected they were being dishonest with me.

It's a difficult thing to determine—should we always help people when they ask us? What do we do when we suspect someone is trying to deceive us in order to get what he or she wants? And perhaps the most difficult question: if our hearts are right, how do we know if what we're doing is helping or hurting people?



The Upside-Down Kingdom of Jesus

Let's begin by considering Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5—the Sermon on the Mount. In short, the way of the kingdom is one where instead of retaliating for the way we're treated, we respond by blessing those who have cursed us. It's clear in Matthew 5:38-42. Jesus said that instead of responding to people who mistreat us by doing the same to them, we should respond by giving them more than they are trying to get from us. (Slapped on one side of your face? Give them the other! Sued for one thing? Give them more! Forced to go out of your way? Go even further than they're asking!) Perhaps the reasoning for this is found in Proverbs 25:21-22. Solomon said if your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. If he is thirsty, give him water. By doing this you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you.

Giving people more than they are trying to forcibly take from us sends a clear message about where our citizenship is found. It also has a way of

bringing about conviction on the part of those who are mistreating us.

Several years ago I was harboring resentment in my heart toward someone above me because I felt this person was preventing me from obtaining a significant goal in my life. I had talked poorly about him behind his back. Then, he gave me a costly gift for Christmas, and my heart toward him changed. There's something about receiving abundant grace that has a way of softening a hard heart.

I have often felt like people seeking help from me (or the church where I pastor) were lying to me in order to obtain what they wanted. My fleshly reaction has been to call them out on it or to simply refuse them. But what would have happened if I took Jesus' words in Matthew 5 more seriously and gave them more than what they were asking for? How might their hearts have been changed? Isn't that more of a picture of the gospel than what my natural reaction has been?

The Why Behind the What

Why should we live this way toward those who mistreat us? Because Jesus' call for us to give to our enemies more than what they are trying to take from us is a reflection of the gospel. Jesus' approach was to bless His enemies. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Jesus did not simply ignore our sin. Instead, He blessed us when we cursed Him. When we mistreated Him, He saved us. This is why it's a blessing for us to live this way toward those who mistreat us—it helps us increasingly identify and experience the power of the One who was mistreated by us. That's why Paul boasted in his weakness. He knew that when he endured weakness for the name of Christ, he experienced more of the power of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Don't help those who are needy just for their sake; help them for your sake, knowing that when you do, you are becoming more like Christ and looking toward eternity rather than

just the here and now. you're amassing treasure that can't be stolen by a thief or ruined by rust or moths.

When I suspect someone is misleading me in order to get something, I am instantly tempted. The thought comes into my mind, "You know he's lying. If you help, you'll lose the power you have over him. Don't help. Show him who's boss." But the truth of God's Word pierces through that darkness, reminding me that being deceived is a blessing; that giving is an opportunity; that losing is winning.

Yes, the guy with the iPhone 7 begging for money is sending a mixed message. "If you have money for cigarettes, you don't need my money for food," I've thought. But that cynicism and bitterness can harm us. We can forget that God's grace for us didn't come when we deserved it or even truly understood what we were being given. Often, opportunities to help are more about us than the one we're helping.

Considering What Truly Helps Others

But another question we must consider is whether or not what people are asking for is truly what is best for them. We'll consider two implications found in two different passages.

The first implication is found in Acts 3 where a lame beggar in search of money approached Peter and John on their way to the temple. They didn't give the man money (they didn't have any). Instead, they were used by Jesus to heal the man. The story

doesn't say this, but we can assume that his lameness was the reason he had to beg. Since Jesus healed him of his physical ailment, he no longer needed to beg for money.

Simply giving money to tide someone over is sometimes not the best thing for his or her well-being. Sometimes people need to get in a program that will help them get clean. Sometimes people need job training. Sometimes people need to learn

how to fish instead of being given a fish. This is actually a lot harder to do than giving someone money. It takes building a relationship, and that will get messy. But isn't that the way of Christ—being willing to get down in the dirt with people in order to help them out?

The second implication is found in John 6. It was right after Jesus fed 5000 men with five loaves and two fishes. This large crowd continued to follow Jesus. But Jesus knew their hearts and called them out for seeking Him only for the bread He gave them (verse 26). He continued to explain that He was the bread of life, and if they would believe in Him, they would never be hungry again. After that conversation ended, many people left Him.

Helping people physically should not be our primary concern, and we might lose relationships when those we're helping understand that. There were some who walked away from Jesus when they realized His feeding them was a tool to point to their spiritual need. Scripture tells us Jesus was willing to let them leave. Please understand I'm not talking about the type of neglect that James 2:15-16 condemns. That's when a friend approaches you with an immediate physical need, and rather than filling it, you offer to only pray instead. That's unhelpful and evidence of fake faith. I'm talking about when you invest in people physically and spiritually and it becomes obvious they don't want the spiritual part—it might be time to let them go. The Father has someone else in store for you to help.

Putting Your Mind and Heart at Ease

I don't think there are clear rules for who every Christian should help and how every Christian should help the needy. Every situation is unique and complex, and each of us is blessed with different means. Our goal is to follow the leading of the Spirit with the opportunities we have sovereignly been given. Of course, all of our

good works have been planned out by our Father (Ephesians 2:10). The key is to keep our hearts from bitterness and cynicism through the gospel, and to ask the Lord, "How are you leading me to bring the greatest good in this situation?" Leave the rest to Him.



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