

## Helping John

by Bob Lupton

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"There's something I'd like your opinion on." John stared intently at me over the steam of two freshly brewed cups of coffee. He wasted no time on playful banter, unlike his typical way of greeting me when we get together for our monthly breakfasts at the OK Cafe. He had just come from an early morning men's Bible study and was obviously perplexed by something.

"What am I supposed to do with all these people who want something from me?" John had money and a lot of people knew it. Daily – sometimes several times a day – he got letters and calls from people imploring him for help with some cause or personal need. He could handle the letters and the phone calls, he said. It was the pleading eyes of a person in some desperate financial crisis that got to him. A struggling father whose family was about to be put out on the street if he couldn't come up with immediate rent money; a pleading young woman at a gas station who needed \$27.15 to get her car out of repair so she could get home to Alabama; a hungry homeless man outside of church asking for a dollar for a bite to eat. "What is a Christian supposed to do with these kinds of requests?"

"I know, I know," he pre-empted my response. "Get involved – take the homeless man to MacDonald's." He was obviously hoping for a different answer from me, something more insightful. After all, I have spent most of my adult life serving among the poor in the inner-city. I should know about these things. Of all people, I should know how to deal responsibly with people in need.

Those who come away empty-handed from their encounters with John might well judge him to be just another penny-pinching businessman. They would be wrong. Those who know John as well as I do would know that in fact he is quite the opposite. John gives generously of his considerable means, especially to those ministries and causes that he believes deeply in. But he has little patience for people who shirk their own personal responsibilities. And another thing that perturbs him is when he discovers that a contribution solicited for one purpose has been spent on another. That's one reason why he is so thorough in his due-diligence before he writes a check. He will research how much a 501(c)3 organization spends on marketing and overhead. He requests a printout of his church's annual financial statement. But how can he know that a gift to a homeless person will go for food and not for booze? And even if he does take a half hour out of his hectic day to sit down over a Big Mac with a street person, how can he know that he is not simply enabling the man to continue an irresponsible lifestyle?

Several scriptures were fresh on John's mind, obviously a carry-over from the morning's Bible study. Feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving your second coat, lending to those who can't repay... and the final convicting blow – "inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brothers, you have done it unto Me," and the damning converse about not doing so. Had John been turning away Christ when he refused to give to those so obviously in desperate need? The thought haunted him.

I wanted to be wise. And profound. I wished that I had gone to seminary and could explain the meaning of the original texts. But, in fact, all I had to go on was thirty years of pragmatic trial and error, a modicum of common sense, and intuition jaded just a bit by hearing too many deceptions and half truths. And, oh yes, a calling to the poor that had been the orienting compass in my life. Three decades of serving in the city should have fine-tuned my compassion skills but, as I confessed to John, I feel as furious as he does when I learn that the young woman at the gas station has used that same \$27.15 story on scores of suckers at dozens of gas stations around town. But could it be that our reluctance to give

to the stranger on the street is much more than a reaction conditioned by cons we have fallen prey to? Could our hesitance be a righteous response from our spirit cautioning us that irresponsible giving is detrimental both to the recipient as well as to the giver?

There was one thing both John and I both readily agreed upon: deep satisfaction registers within us when we give of ourselves to meet a legitimate human need. Like stopping to help at the scene of an accident or comforting a lost child frantically searching for his mother in a mall. When the need is real and the situation critical, we will gladly sacrifice our time, resources and even personal safety to rescue someone from trouble. It is the imprint of the image of our Creator.

There is also something quite opposite and equally poignant that reacts in our spirits when we encounter a grave injustice. Like the kind-talking confidence man who defrauds an aging widow out of her life savings or the shrewd executive who embezzles from his workers their hard-earned retirement funds. Our outrage at such despicable behavior also reflects the image of our Creator.

Why, then, does John feel so guilty walking past the panhandler with the "Homeless, please help, God bless you" sign when there is virtually no way to determine where a gift will go? Is it really a charitable act to support the questionable (and likely self-destructive) habits of a stranger when John would refuse to do the same for his own son? We raise our children to become self-sufficient, responsible adults. We push them to develop their potential. We try our best to keep them away from ensnaring drugs and bad influences. But if our best efforts fail, if, tragically, a child chooses a path toward self-destruction, tough love will eventually necessitate our cutting off their support. Our anguish intensifies when their "friends" deepen the entrapment by sharing their beds and needles. Is there really any way for John to know that his \$27.15 will not add to the torment of some grieving parents as well as deepen the dependency of their prodigal daughter?

So why the guilt? Is it false guilt arising out of the "oughts" and "shoulds" picked up from parents and preachers? John and I broke into laughter recalling the tactics of a couple of homeless guys who occasionally wait outside our church on Sunday morning. Refuse their appeal and their pitiful "help me" expressions quickly turn to "and-you-call-yourself-a-Christian" sneers. They certainly know their audience. We couldn't decide which emotion was stronger – guilt from being uncharitable or resentment over their manipulation.

These homeless entrepreneurs have learned what relief agencies have known for a long time – pity is a powerful motivator. If you can properly portray a picture of desperation, whether a starving child or a disheveled beggar, the human heart instinctively responds. The more seasoned solicitors have refined their presentations to draw the prospective donor into the plight with just the right mix of misery and hope. Too much anguish and the viewer is grossed out; too much hope and he gets away guilt-free. At least the guys outside our church get the satisfaction of turning the knife in a lost prospect, we chuckled. The comic relief felt good. That we could so nonchalantly pass by the hungry did not. We were suddenly back to John's original question.

No, we should not give irresponsibly. Buying drugs or alcohol for an addicted person is not responsible. Neither is accepting a warm feeling in exchange for dropping money into a cup. Yet, what about those with mental illness who have fallen through the cracks? And the abused mother who has fled for safety with her children and landed in a shelter? For some, hot soup and clean clothes and a dollar-in-the-cup are life-preserving sources. Admittedly, this sort of one-way charity is demeaning for the recipient but then, desperation is a prideless place to be. But is there any way we can decipher whether the story we are hearing is true or fabricated?

There is another means of assisting, of course, that hardly requires any verification. Work.

If you hire a person to do legitimate work for reasonable pay, the exchange is honorable and dignifying regardless of how the person chooses to spend the money. But really, how realistic is it for John to take off work to create a job and spend the day supervising a homeless man? Better to support a program that is in this business.

Due-diligence. That's the best answer I could come up with. Due-diligence and the prompting of the Spirit. Once on a rare occasion you may have this inner nudging that tells you to stop immediately and help a person. You don't know why but there's just a strong impression that you should offer money or food or a ride. There's no rational explanation. This may well be the Divine Spirit at work in ways we will not understand until the curtain of eternity is pulled back. There are no assurances but it's worth the risk. Other than this, due-diligence is my answer. If you don't have time to invest in forging a trusting relationship, give your money to a ministry that does.

John thought that my answer might be a little self-serving.