



By Dr. Richard Youngblood

Question: What is our responsibility toward people who come to us asking for help but seem unwilling to work even though they appear very capable?

We should not naively trust that every appeal for help is justified. There are individuals who use the generosity of others improperly and refuse to accept responsibility for their own lives. But neither should we use the evidence of laziness, welfare fraud or dishonesty as an excuse to withhold compassion for fear we may reward some evil. It is far better to err on the side of generosity than to refuse to help people at all. In his own time, God will administer appropriate justice both to those who are deceptive and dishonest and to those who show no compassion for the poor.

Jesus had great compassion for the poor. His mission included preaching “good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). He also said, “Blessed are the poor” (Luke 6:20); and he taught that giving to the poor lays up treasure in heaven that will never be exhausted or stolen by thieves (Luke 12:33, 18:22). However, under guidance of the Holy Spirit from Jesus, the apostle Paul wrote: “For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: If a man will not work, he shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

To provide food for a person who is able but unwilling to work and earn his food is short-sighted. It can lead to an irresponsible pattern and an unhealthy dependency in that life. In a similar way, parents do not help their children’s education by doing homework and writing reports for them. Also, covering up for a friend who is absent from work, cheating on her husband, or using illegal drugs and alcohol is no real favor. Any form of help to others that knowingly allows them to evade personal responsibility through deceit or laziness is misguided.

Perhaps there is a better way to deal with this problem. We may gain personal esteem and praise from others by throwing money, food and clothing to the poor. But would it not be better to seek the long-range good that can only come through giving of our time, efforts and guidance as well as food, clothing and money? This kind of help can give dignity and show respect while also encouraging those in need to accept responsibility for their own lives as far as possible. I believe Jesus would endorse the saying, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” Making this kind of

effort toward those who ask for help tests the quality of our compassion. It takes more effort than some are willing to give, but it can change lives for the better and not just meet day-to-day needs.

In his compassion for the poor and sick, Jesus never allowed them to evade responsibility for their own lives and actions. Not having His ability to know their lives and hearts, we will make mistakes. But that should not stop us from helping. However, I do propose that we give careful thought to what it really means to show compassion. When we consider the long-range best interests of a person in need, compassion may mean that our giving should take different forms for different people at different times. There are many people who are without jobs and who don't know how to get a job or how to manage their lives when they do. Many of these people need more than daily food, clothes and shelter. They need someone who cares enough to help them learn to live responsibly and with dignity. We need to pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance as we seek to show true compassion to our friends and neighbors.

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