

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

Certainly 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 in the world as an excuse to withhold compassion from others for fear we may reward some evil. It is far better to err on the side of compassion than to fail to help people with genuine needs.

The mission of Jesus 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). On the other hand, 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 NIV).

Any form of help to others that knowingly allows them to evade personal responsibility through deceit or laziness is misguided. For example, parents do not help their children’s education by doing homework and writing reports for them. Covering on the job for a friend who is absent from work while cheating on her husband or using illegal drugs and alcohol is no real favor. In the same way, supporting a person who is lazy and unwilling to work when he is able to work fails to help him become the independent and responsible citizen of society that he needs to become.

Perhaps there is a better way to deal with this problem. We may gain personal esteem and praise from other people by giving money, food and clothing to the poor. But, would it not be better to seek the long-range good that can come through giving of our time, efforts and guidance as well as food, clothes and money? This kind of help can give dignity and respect to those who are often treated as if they are ignorant and incapable. At the same time, such action can encourage people who are in need to accept responsibility for their own lives as much as possible. I believe Jesus would endorse the saying, “Give a person 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 of us are willing to give; but when appropriately done, it can change lives instead of only meeting day-to-day needs.

In his compassion for the poor and sick, Jesus did not allow individuals to evade responsibility for their own lives and actions. Notice how he questioned a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, “Do you want to get well?” (John 5:6). Jesus did heal him. But, he wanted the man to accept some responsibility for the life he would be given as a well man. Since we do not have the ability of Jesus to perceive the hearts of people, we will make mistakes; however, this should not stop us from helping someone in need. Therefore, I would propose that we give careful thought to what it really means to show compassion to those who are poor. When we consider the long-range best interest of a person in need, compassion may mean that our giving should take different forms to different people at different times. May God bless you for caring.

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