

Let's Go Deeper...
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In recent months, we've had an uptick in persons panhandling on church property -- parking lot, Watkins Building, and the church building itself. As I stood at the door after worship on Sunday, a man who had gone through the line earlier whom I had personally greeted in the sanctuary just before worship circled back and asked me for some cash. I politely declined.



Let me tell you why. Christians are easy marks. Our faith tradition tells us to help others. There are countless Scriptures mandating that God's people demonstrate care for the poor, among the most famous being Jesus' words in Matthew 25: "Then the righteous will answer him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'" So, when someone asks us for some change or a few dollars for a bus pass or \$40 to buy a Greyhound ticket to get back home or enough for just one night's stay at the motel, we're inclined to oblige. Turn away a person in need and we're turning away the Lord himself.

I suppose I was a particularly juicy mark on Sunday, given that the Scripture passage from The Sermon on the Mount included the line, "Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."

Am I a rank hypocrite? Had I not taught the children during the Children's Time that 1 in 7 people in this nation struggle to put adequate food on the table? And did I not commend our congregation for bringing in over 1,100 cans of soup (an act of mercy) as well encouraging all of us to write a letter in the coming weeks for the Bread for the World Offering of Letters (an act of justice)? If I urged all God's children in the sanctuary to give in ways that 'give others their daily bread' and preached on a passage that commands generosity, then why didn't I reach into my wallet and fork over a twenty (or two, as was asked of me)?

Part of my polite refusal of the man who approached me was my knowing enough of his personal story to suspect that he was scamming me for money that would be used not for what he said it would be used for, but rather for self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol or drugs. If *the* fundamental question of Christian ethics is "What does love require?" then for me to give that man cash which in turn would be used to sate an addiction would not be loving, but enabling. It may assuage my guilt in the short term, but in the long term it only puts him more deeply in bondage... and more dependent on hitting up someone else the next time he craves a buzz.

As I type that, I can't help but to think of a story about C.S. Lewis. One day, Lewis and a friend were walking down the road and came upon a street person who reached out to them for help. While his friend kept walking, Lewis stopped and proceeded to empty his wallet. When they resumed their journey, his friend asked, "What are you doing giving him your money like that? Don't you know he's

just going to go squander all that on ale?" Lewis paused and replied, "That's all I was going to do with it."

In all seriousness, what does love require? Not giving him a few dollars in order to assuage my guilt or get him off my back. Not subsidizing an addiction or rewarding a lie. Love requires me to treat him with decency and dignity-- to treat him as a brother, if you will—and, if possible, to offer real assistance.

I tried to offer the former by asking him his name. When he told me, I told him my name and extended my hand. "Glad to meet you, sir."

As for the latter, I said, "We don't give out cash, but there are many ways our church does help. For instance, on the first Monday and Wednesday of the month we have a ministry called Helping Hands that provides bus passes, snack items, toiletries, and other things I know you would find helpful. We also provide emergency food supplies Monday through Friday next door at our God's Pantry office. And we help provide shelter for more than a dozen homeless men each night of the week through a ministry called Room in the Inn. I can provide you more information about any of those ministries if that would be helpful and I can also hand you a brochure that will include addresses and phone numbers for social-service organizations where food, shelter, healthcare services and other such assistance are available, many within a short walk from here. Would any of that be helpful to you?"

I did not tell him that Jennie and I (and so many of you), as an expression of our desire to be faithful to Jesus' call to minister to the poor, contribute *many* twenty dollar bills in the form of canned goods, volunteer hours, and checks designated for the mercy and justice ministries Central supports (as well as others Central does not), all of which are loving responses to neighbors in need.

One of my touchstone Scriptures for doing what love requires is the story in Acts 3 of Peter and John healing the lame man. The men respond to the beggar's request for funds not by giving him money but by giving him a better gift: the gift of healing. "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." Ultimately, love requires offering people a connection with Jesus Christ and a community of faith. Friendship. Encouragement. Sometimes love requires 'tough love'-- a kick in the seat of the pants. People need love even more than money.

As for the guy on Sunday who asked me for forty bucks-- after I introduced myself, asked his name, shook his hand, offered to provide him all the forms of service I enumerated above and asked him, "Would any of that be helpful to you?," he shook his head No, took about ten steps, and asked someone else for some money.

What do you think is the best approach for responding to those who ask us for some cash?