

How should individual Christians give handouts to the needy?

Written by Tim Black

Tuesday, 02 February 2016 11:47 - Last Updated Tuesday, 30 August 2016 12:05

A friend shared some experiences and asked me effectively,

"How should individual Christians give handouts to the needy?"

I'm thinking about what to say in response to your questions. Lots of thoughts come to mind. Here are some of them:

1. God freely justifies, so we should freely give the first time someone asks. God also sanctifies, so we should only continue helping if the needy person is willing to obey God's commands, and work to get the help they need. You have to be willing to say things like, "This is a free gift because God forgives those who repent of their sins and believe in Christ, free of charge," and "Friend, until you put in that job application I helped you get and you promised you'd fill out, I'm not going to help you further." Sometimes how they respond to such requirements will show you their true colors.

2. Don't give money to needy people; give food, clothing, buy their bus ticket. So many spend the money on drugs, alcohol, cigarettes. If they want gas for a long trip, consider taking them by the police station first to be sure they're not on the run. If they're going on a long trip, they have the time.

3. Ask, "Do you go to a church?" If they say "Yes," ask which one, and send (or offer to take) them there (say "I'll help you, through your church.") If they say "No," ask "Why not?"

4. Instead of handouts, give money to your local church first, then a homeless shelter or some other such organization which is well-equipped to help, and is integrated into that locale. They have the ability to hold people accountable to change their lives, by the strength God provides through the gospel and practical counseling. Tell the needy, "I give through my church (or X homeless shelter). Come there with me and we'll help you out. On the way, let me tell you what God has done for me. Have you ever committed a sin?" Are you going to lead them, or are they going to lead you?

5. Bankrupt people can't keep all their promises, however sincere they are. They can't. They don't have the resources.

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6. I'd hardly trust anything or anyone in Las Vegas. I don't have to tell you that, but maybe it bears repeating. I want to believe needy people's stories, and in a sense I do (I take them at their word), but I don't trust anything a needy person says. I trust solid evidence from two or more independent sources.

Also regarding Las Vegas, I don't think it's right to replace 1) gambling with money with 2) buying needy people's ears for the gospel with money. This is a subtle matter of priorities in your own heart, which may not actually change what you do on the outside. We should want to help people with money, and their greater need is for the gospel. Our intent should never be to bait and switch, but to address the person's true needs as a whole. There is a temptation in which needy people place me and other Christians, to substitute diaconal aid for gospel ministry. A needy person's request is an opportunity to share the word, as well as to help that person.

7. Whenever I pray with a needy person, I ask God to forgive their and my sins for Christ's sake, and to help us follow Christ as our Savior and Lord, for our good.