



## TO GIVE OR NOT TO GIVE

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My husband always gives, I seldom do. Whether or not to give to panhandlers is a question that usually sparks spirited opinions and self-doubt among people of faith and good will. Being a frugal person but committed to stewardship, I have struggled with this for years. On one hand, the gospel calls us to care for those who cannot care for themselves. On the other hand we've all heard stories of beggars asking for money for food followed by entering a liquor store. It's hard to know the best thing to do.

In Cincinnati lately merchants and shoppers have complained that panhandlers are discouraging business. Having traveled in several third world countries I find the complaints understandable but ironic. Jim and I didn't know what real hassle was until we were the only white people in sight in India, Indonesia, Mali, or Kenya. Our income didn't matter. The fact that we were white, and thus stood out as foreigners, made us rich and fair game for accosting. I felt like the Peanuts character, Pigpen, who always had a cloud of dirt swarming around him, only I had children and adults all holding out their hands. The children just gestured toward their mouth.

At first it broke my heart but after weeks of not being able to walk down a street without hundreds of persistent requests for money, I felt weary. In Indonesia our son said the custom there was to always give a few pennies. He was a volunteer teacher and it was expected that anyone who had a job would give something. Our daughter in Africa said the opposite. Since she was living on a Peace Corps salary she said giving money only encouraged them to accost all foreigners making life difficult for those on a low income like herself.

All this was whirling in my head when I was in India last summer. I was waiting outside a store when a girl about eight came up to me asking for money. I said, "no." She came back several times. I said, "no" several times. But it was a long wait and I got to thinking. In my own spiritual journey, I had been working on recognizing Jesus in every person I meet. The more I thought about Jesus dwelling in this child, I knew I had to give her something – *if* she came back. Of course she did and I was ready. How could I refuse Jesus? I don't keep much cash on me, but I did have several rupees in paper money. I decided to give her half of what I had. I felt good.

A few minutes later she came back with her brother. He asked. I felt manipulated and wondered when this would stop. Eventually, I communicated that they should share the money between the two of them. They didn't like it. If I had been Solomon, I would have torn the bill in half and that might have forced sibling cooperation. In the end, I didn't feel good. *I* felt torn. That's how I usually feel in these situations. Will the asking never end? Although the percentage of beggars in the U.S. is only a fraction of what I've seen in third world countries, the question remains – to give or not to give.

Even generous people want to feel that their gift is well spent and not abused. Yet if Jesus truly does dwell in each of us, how can we refuse the needs of our brothers and sisters? Certainly it is humiliating to be reduced to begging. It is a cry for help. What is the Christian to do? May I suggest a few ideas from my own experience and other's who have wrestled with this question:

1. Give generously to both organizations that directly serve the poor and also those that address the root causes of poverty.
2. When presented with an individual in need, if possible, take time. Some people offer to buy the person food or carry gift certificates with them to fast food restaurants. Some actually join the person for lunch. This can take time and feel awkward but it can also give us a window into another's life. If the person refuses, you know it wasn't a sincere request.
3. When taking time is genuinely not possible, still look the person in the eye, treat him or her with respect, offer a prayer.
4. One family keeps a bag of non-perishable food in their car and offers it to the person at the side of the road with a "Will work for food" sign.
5. Get to know the social service agencies and churches in your community. If you can't personally help, tell or take the solicitor to people who can.
6. If you feel comfortable giving money, do. Yes, sometimes you will be taken advantage of, but sometimes not. It's hard to know which time is which. If you don't feel comfortable giving money, occasionally do it anyway. It's a way of letting go and trusting God. "Whatever you do for the least of my brethren, that you do unto me."