

They Will Always Be
by Bob Bekins
January 2015

I don't know about you, but I have conflicting thoughts about street corner pan handlers, friends who beg, and those people that come up to you in a gas station and "need \$5 for gas to get home to Los Angeles." In Mark 14:7 Jesus said, "For you will always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you will not always have Me."

At a gas station the other night I was given the \$5 need line. I decided to hang around for a little and see what was going on. There were two young men working out of a truck. They looked very depressed while they were pitching their plight, but when they scored, they smiled across the lot at each other and were in high spirits. They purchased food and drinks inside and occasionally stopped to refresh themselves. I don't know what their financial goal was, but they seemed to be attaining it at a fairly rapid pace.

If you know me well, you also know that I have friends in the full spectrum of financial dependence and independence. Each, regardless of their station, must work through health issues, personal joys, their sins, and individual spiritual journeys. What bothers me about those in what I will call Medium Need is that some of them won't work. They are capable, but they won't do it. They have money for cigarettes, cable TV, Redbox movies, and other minor indulgences but need to hit up others for those nagging things like traffic tickets, car insurance, car registration, and food. In several cases I have learned that my "loan money" was used for drugs. This bothers me terribly. Clearly I am enabling them to live a lifestyle which robs them of their dignity which is found in gainful employment.

I don't have an answer for this permanent and ancient question about the "poor." However, having traveled to other countries and seen true poverty I want to remind that we have many programs in the US to assure that no one goes hungry, hospitals that care for people without insurance, places for people to live inexpensively, help with utilities, free education for 13 years, water running from the tap at incredibly low prices, and a government that seeks to close any gap "because we are not doing enough."

A friend traveled to South Africa to plant gardens for truly destitute people. He painted a picture of the contrast: those who have no money often go without food, medical assistance, formal education, and a place to sleep. Water had to be carried in buckets from the river a mile away. My favorite story was of three children who had lost both parents to AIDS and the oldest son, who was 12, was taking care of the two little ones. ALL of the difficulties in this paragraph resided in their mud and sticks home. When the crew planted a garden for them, the three kids sobbed and shook with joy AND began the process of hauling thirty-pound buckets of water up from the river a mile away to water it. They had gone to work while those in the US who can, do not.

When the average tax rate in the early 1950's was five percent for a family, they had money to give to the poor. The various levels of government have robbed us of that, now that our tax rate hovers between 35 and 50% of a family's income, depending on who you talk to. It goes to the

merit of Americans back then, and even now, that we can still give freely from what is left. and we do GIVE. Earthquake in Haiti, hurricanes in the Gulf States, tsunami's in Thailand are followed quickly by American tax dollars and speedily trailed by the American Red Cross, World Vision, and other predominantly US sponsored charities.

So do give to the poor, but be smart about it. More than ten percent of every dollar you make right now, goes from your pocket as taxes to pay for these US, State and County programs. So even if you never give a penny to someone who approaches you, you have already done more than any other country's citizens. If you give, give to an organization not some prankster in the gas station no matter how sad he looks.

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