

HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND TO PAN- HANDLERS?



*I don't know about you but
being a Christian really puts me
in a bind when it comes to
people who ask me for money
out on the street.*

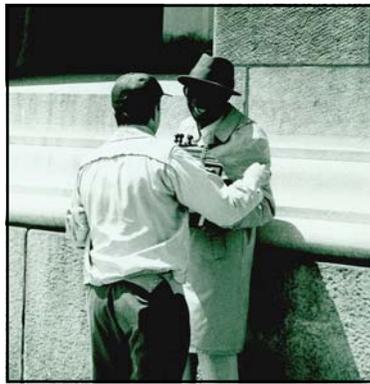
**“Mercy is *compassion*
toward those
who are in need,
resulting in *action*
to alleviate that need,
through acts of *charity* leading
toward *self-sustainment*.”**

Randy Nabors

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Jesus wants me to give to those who ask, yet the Apostle Paul tells me if someone doesn't work they shouldn't eat. Is this a contest between Jesus and Paul? Since I believe both were speaking under the authority of the Holy Spirit then I think the proper thing to do is interpret Scripture by comparing Scripture.

I can tell you how I have come to think about this subject, since it is one I have to deal with almost every day, and every time I visit another city. We have many pan-handlers in our country these days. Some of these folks are homeless, some of these folks are

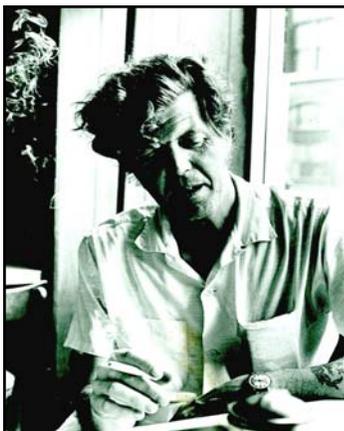


harmless, some of these folks are hustlers, and some of these folks are honest. I suppose if there was a sure-fire way to know that a person really needed immediate help and was telling me the truth then I wouldn't feel caught in a bind. The bind is there because encouraging and enabling liars, thieves, and lazy people is something I don't want to do. The bind is there because I personally don't like someone trying to coerce my generosity or manipulate me through guilt or fear. In fact, it really ticks me off.

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Have you ever been accosted on the street and been given a lecture by how “so-called Christians” aren’t really helping anyone? What a set up! I guess another reason I feel caught in a bind is that I do actively try to help poor people. I try to be generous in ways that I think will really lead to someone’s development and get them out of poverty. Since I grew up poor I find it much better to help someone get out of poverty than to just sustain them in a miserable condition. I really don’t want to support somebody’s crack or alcohol habit, and I find that a little coin change here and there actually keeps somebody in a destructive life-style.

I feel caught in a bind because I don’t think the proper response to street folks is to give them a lecture, or start to give them an evangelical witness, unless we can actually get into a real conversation and a relationship. I would very much like to make a difference in someone’s life, and not just give them something to get rid of them, or give them something so I can feel like I did my good deed for the day. Most of those pocket change good deeds just keep people in bondage to living on the street.



People who come up to strangers are probably used to doing it, especially if you sense they have a great opening line.



So, I think we all need to get a little bit hard nosed about it. First of all, people who come up to strangers are probably used to doing it, especially if you sense they have a great opening line. If they use guilt, or anger, or desperation (a real tool for female hustlers) then you can be pretty sure they have set you up as a target.

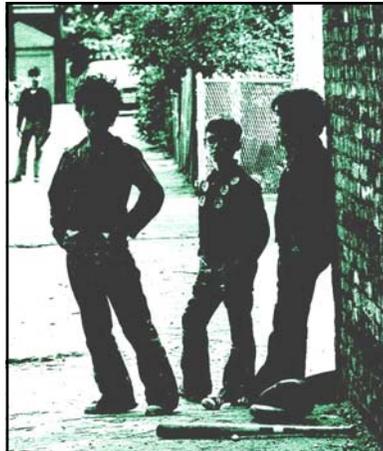
I say, choose your target. If you see someone in need or hurting or wandering the streets and you want to help them, great. It is better of course, to actually sponsor someone in a program that changes his life. Try giving your money to that. Most guys who say they will “work for food” won’t. They want the cash straight up. So, if you have work for them to do then offer it. If someone needs a meal, take them to the local diner and watch them eat it (this gives you a great time to form a relationship). Don’t give cash, or even a bag of groceries, to a healthy single adult (addicts know how to sell groceries).

Women who are alone should never stop to open their purse and give out money; that just isn’t wise. Don’t be fooled by people who try to hook you up with a point of reference, acting as if they know you by asking if you remember them, or even mentioning a prominent name in the neighborhood.

In Christianity we are not promised blessings for giving alms to the poor, but we are blessed in helping the truly needy, like widows and orphans and the alien.

Find out the names, addresses, and policies of the local soup kitchens and shelters. I have had plenty of folks want me to give them housing, but when I offer to take them to the place that offers it they decline. It usually turns out they have been kicked out, and they want cash, or they want a nice hotel room. So do I, but I am not asking someone else to pay for it.

Now if you want to give to anyone who asks, whatever they ask for, or whatever you can find in your pocket, then that is your choice. You just make it harder for everyone coming behind you. In fact you make it harder for the whole city since the area in which they were rewarded for begging



becomes their place of income. In Christianity we are not promised blessings for giving alms to the poor, but we are blessed in helping the truly needy, like widows and orphans and the alien. We are blessed in giving the poor justice and not allowing them to suffer injustice. But a great injustice is done to the poor if you protect them from the God-given consequences of an appetite (which drives people to work), or of laziness.

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I absolutely want to be more like Jesus, and I want to truly help poor people, not multiply them. Here are some simple ways you might start.

- Don't carry money around if you know you are going to get hit up for it.
- Tell people if they truly want help to meet you on Sunday at worship (or at a local mercy ministry) and you will set them up with the Deacons or mercy workers and make sure they get into a good program.
- If you don't have one in your church, then you should start one because there are many genuine poor people who need help, and a hand up, not a hand-out.

I confess I occasionally give out change and money to strangers who ask me on the street. I try hard not to do it and I try to evaluate whether it is a hustle or not, but sometimes I just feel sorry for somebody. I don't condemn myself or anyone else, for this. Where I live I know most of the hustlers, and even they still can get to me. But, usually it is in a way that I know I am not hurting them. I try to be loving and friendly, I give rides and I buy meals, and I encourage them towards Christ. If you know the folks in your neighborhood, keep offering a life-line, a door to a training, work, or shelter program. But please, stop being careless about your generosity. Our guilt and our generosity is turning out not to be mercy, but a reward for too many larcenous hearts.

Randy Nabors

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The purpose of MNA Mercy Ministries is to encourage and equip PCA churches and members to become involved in a growing way with ministries to people who not only need the Gospel but who face circumstances of tangible need or difficulty. While these needs exist everywhere, they are often more prevalent in the concentrated populations of the cities. These concentrations of population offer great opportunity for ministry because city programs can address the needs of many people in close proximity.

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