

Responding to the Disenfranchised

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Abstract

This article considers one perspective on a Christian response to people who are disenfranchised from society. Whether this is due to poverty, disability or poor decisions by those affected, what should a Christian response be? Are there any reasons why a helping response should be attenuated? Helping is provided through physical, social and spiritual responses. The idea of “caring distance” is explored as a way to describe the relationship between those needing help and those having the ability to provide it. We also consider the differences between individual and corporate responses to people in need. The author concludes that people should be helped independent of the cause of their situation. Additionally, because one pays taxes, this does not necessarily demonstrate a caring disposition or remove the need for people to care for their neighbors in tangible ways.

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J. R. R. Tolkien was once questioned by letter about the climax of his classic trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*. The entire work builds to the point when the hero, Frodo, can deliver a major blow to the forces of evil by casting an all-powerful ring into a chasm of fire. After many trials and life-threatening situations, Frodo peers over the precipice with the ring. However, at that point, he is unable to throw the ring into the fire of his own accord. In responding to the question about this situation, Tolkien drafted the following, excerpted from a letter:

Frodo indeed “failed” as a hero, as conceived by simple minds: he did not endure to the end; he gave in, ratted. I do not say “simple minds” with contempt: they often see with clarity the simple truth and the absolute ideal to which effort must be directed, even if it is unattainable. Their weakness, however, is twofold. *They do not perceive the complexity of any given situation in Time, in which an absolute ideal is enmeshed. They tend to forget that strange element in the World that we call Pity or Mercy, which is also an absolute requirement in moral judgment (since it is present in the Divine nature). In its highest exercise it belongs to God.* (Carpenter & Tolkien, 1981, p. 326; emphasis added)

The discussion about Frodo and the Cracks of Doom is interesting to enthusiasts of the classic work, yet Tolkien’s comments shed light on the complex nature of human interactions. “Simple minds” might indeed take encounters at face value. Tolkien chides us to look more deeply at human interactions, to see the “situation in Time” and the enmeshed absolute ideals. It would be easy to be completely overwhelmed and rendered immobile by the depth of enmeshed ideals in human interactions. It is suspected that at times we deliberately overlook some of these aspects of life, just to be able to live. But we now know of fair-trade coffee, or the importance of recycling, because we have been made aware of the ideals leading to these practices. Someone approaches us seeking some kind of assistance, perhaps most typically money, but potentially caring or just someone to listen to them. Someone else experiences the social consequences of disability and looks to us for friendship. When one approaches us with any of these motives, what ideals inform our response, as Christians, to people whose lives are marked by disenfranchisement as a result of disability, personal choices, or poverty (these very different but related experiences)? In considering responses, there are at least two levels of misunderstanding attributed by Tolkien to

simple minds. First, they don't see the complexity of human interactions, of a given situation in time. Without a deeper understanding, one might not take all the factors into account that are enmeshed together and may simply respond in a face-value kind of way. Second, one may fail to account for "Pity or Mercy . . . an absolute requirement in human judgment." Let us consider each of these.

Situation Complexity

The first misperception about interactions between people relates to one's understanding of the complexity of a "given situation in Time in which an absolute ideal is enmeshed." Situational understanding will be determined by what knowledge of absolute ideals, previous experience, and limits is brought to a situation. So the understanding of the complexity of the situation and the ideals enmeshed therein will be controlled by the degrees of freedom that the understander has at their disposal to move in. The starting point is one's worldview and how that impacts the response to basic questions: Why do people face the challenges they do? Who is responsible? Does it matter who is responsible? Also, basic questions, such as whether there is a God, also enter into untangling enmeshed ideals, leading to proposed responses or solutions. In a general way, understandings might result in three types of responses: physical, social and spiritual. Let's consider each of these.

On a very basic level, the three responses could be stated as follows: First, the strictly physical response would be to address physical needs by simply giving someone money or something to eat or drink (not a bad response). Second, the strictly social response would be to give someone a kind word or a pat on the back or even friendship on some level (another good response). Third, the strictly spiritual response at worst would be to simply say, "I'll pray for you," or the bringing of the hope of God's grace in a difficult situation (which is still not a bad response, although a robust Christian spiritual response should also include the physical and social aspects mentioned). Each of these responses is indeed important in and of itself and does address at least one enmeshed ideal. But by themselves, they appear to be incomplete. Some might not even see the third ideal as even relevant. In reality, the third is without doubt the most important. From a Christian perspective, the interaction between two people may shape the eternal destiny of one of them. Could there be any greater unperceived depth to a situation in time?

As stated, the complexity of a helping situation might be understood by the "degrees of freedom" that the understander has at his disposal to

move in. Limited understanding of complexity might limit responses to the confluence of events and individuals leading to the dilemma that the disenfranchised individual is facing.

The Matthew 25:40-45 passage comes to mind regarding responses. We are told that when we do things for others, we do them for the Divine himself (Jesus). That changes things in myriad ways. We suddenly recognize the incredible depth any interaction between two people takes on. The Bible reveals that I am not just buying a disabled friend a cup of coffee; I am engaged in a deeply significant interaction that has ramifications for him and *me*. In a real way, I am loving, encouraging, and showing kindness to the God of the universe. I often think about this when I engage in a conversation with one of my friends who is intellectually disabled. My friend may comment something like, “Did you hear the man on the radio? He sings good!” Hopefully, my loving, friendly response reflects a greater depth than either of us engaged in the conversation would ever suspect. This deep meaning goes both ways. Pity or mercy change the perception of every human interaction but particularly between those with and without. Under the sovereignty of God, the things I have are given to me (1 Corinthians 4:7) and are received within the context of the principle “to whom much is given, much is expected” (Luke 12:48). Responses, or a lack thereof, then find their basis in spiritual principles.

In John 9, when the disciples noticed that Jesus saw a man who had been blind since birth, they asked him, “Rabbi . . . why was this man born blind? Was it because of his own sins or his parents’ sins?” One wonders about their motivation. Was this simply a topic for conversation or did they wonder about the impact of the man’s assumed sin leading to the blindness in the response Jesus would have toward the man? Jesus says,

“It was not because of his sins or his parents’ sins” Jesus answered. “This happened so the power of God could be seen in him. We must quickly carry out the task assigned us by the one who sent us. The night is coming, and then no one can work.” (John 9:3-4, NLT)

This happened such that God’s power could be seen in him. But how is God’s power seen? Merrill C. Tenney, twentieth-century Bible scholar and author, wrote that this passage might be translated in a different way:

Neither did this man sin, nor his parents. But that the works of God should be made manifest in him, we must work the works of him that sent me, while it is still day; the night cometh when no man can work. (1976, p. 154)

It appears that how we are to respond to people ensures that the works of God are manifested toward others. In what we do, we are agents of the works of God. This once again evidences an incredible depth in human interactions. That we are God’s agents does not then imply we know what the ends of our interactions are. We are to act as we should toward one another and God will use that to achieve what he desires.

Early in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien foreshadows the events that are the climax of the trilogy alluded to at the start of this paper. Gandalf chides Frodo about his comments regarding Gollum:

For even the very wise cannot see all ends. I have not much hope that Gollum can be cured before he dies, but there is a chance of it. And he is bound up with the fate of the Ring. My heart tells me that he has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end; and when that comes, the pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many—yours not least. (Tolkien, 1965, p. 69)

When Frodo is unable to throw the ring into the chasm of fire, Gollum bites off Frodo’s finger; but in Gollum’s excitement of finally having the ring again, he falls into the chasm, thereby unintentionally completing Frodo’s quest and destroying the ring. But the depth is there nonetheless. How the depth between people plays itself out for them and those around them is difficult to determine in the moment. But there is power in these interactions. People will at times comment about how a word from someone changed the direction of their lives, while the one who made the comment cannot even recall the interaction.

Pity or Mercy

Second, one may respond without taking “Pity or Mercy” (a reflection of the divine) into account. It is interesting to examine some of the moral-development assessment scales available. As evidenced by these tests of personal morality, society has most definitely abandoned the notion of codified morality. Rather than a final standard proposed by a set of religious beliefs, one is one’s own final authority. There are, therefore, no overall guiding principles for behavior. Increasingly, we seem to be moving away from morality based upon on a relationship with the Divine. There is also no final authority over one’s own behavior. To many, even the notion of evil has become very subjective, if there even is such a thing. Sadly, the perspective that one has

responsibility toward one's neighbor before God wanes. Responsibility is governed only by legal judgment of others (and only if one gets caught) or by oneself (in all other behaviors). We hope people will be motivated to act kindly toward others. However, when there is no expectation relative to how one is to behave, or for our purposes how one responds to a disenfranchised person, then there is the potential for moral anarchy overall and the lack of a deep reason for compassionate responses relative to disenfranchised individuals. Why should one respond in a positive, caring manner to a disabled person? What is the benefit to me personally if I help someone? What if it appears to me that there is little or maybe no discernible benefit and even a detriment to me? Society takes the lives of unborn children with Down syndrome in a confused claim to prevent perceived suffering (largely social, and caused by society's discrimination), but their motivations are debatable.

In contrast, a response to hurting people informed by pity or mercy might provide benefits such as (1) experiencing joy in doing what is right, (2) responding more like Jesus, (3) embracing the change in oneself that non-customary relationships cause (McNair & McKinney, 2016), (4) learning to love one's neighbor, (5) bringing glory to God, and, as stated earlier, (6) even the ultimate benefit of guiding someone to being made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. The spiritual response informs and completes the physical and social responses. Additionally, it develops a spiritual sensitivity *in the person who is helping*, leading to a changed life: a conforming to the Divine nature.

In regard to responses, might we also consider the notion of "caring distance" between individuals (McNair, 1997)? Caring distance has been defined as:

The diminishing of concern/responsibility/effort (and possibly knowledge in the case of interpersonal caring distance) by people or groups as physical, interpersonal or administrative distance increases between these people or groups and the specific person, group, intervention or program of interest. (McNair, 1997, p. 6)

For example, when they were younger, I held significant responsibility for the care of my children. Society expects me to be sure that my children are adequately fed, have a place to live, and are taken to school. If I were to go on vacation leaving very young children at home, I would risk criminal proceedings. However, I am not legally responsible for anyone else's children if I go on vacation. Additionally, if there are children who do not have parents to

provide the basics listed above, I am still not responsible, as the government has agencies that I support with my taxes that take care of these children. I therefore have little or no *legal* responsibility as an individual toward these persons. Society has determined that the caring distance between me and my children is significantly different from the caring distance between me and someone else's children. This is also true for other members of my family. The more extended a family member is from me, the less responsibility is imposed on me by my family or society relative to that individual.

However, an individual may choose to be involved in relationships with other people; that is, she may choose to engage in a friendship with someone. This is risky, however, as with such involvement, the social environment will place increased expectations on her, even if just informally, relative to that individual's situation. There may be legal responsibility, for example, if she is aware that a person is being abused and does not report it. But most of the responsibility imposed emanates from the network of friends and acquaintances with whom she is associated or from a self-imposed responsibility. A different caring distance will be expected of her as an individual because of her relationship with the disenfranchised person.

We can also see this in the way programs or paid relationships are embraced over people choosing to help others. Yes, there are times when professional services are needed, but more often than not, caring, personal involvement and friendship are what is needed. As McKnight (1977; 1994) realized, services are provided by the government when what is needed is caring.

Jesus' Example Regarding Limiting Criteria Relative to Who Might Be Helped

Who of the disenfranchised should be the subject of our efforts? This was stated in a slightly different manner when a questioner asked of Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responded with the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). Now we don't know if it is a true story of something that Jesus himself observed or if it's simply a parable. The story relates that a Jewish man was attacked by thieves who beat him and left him for dead. Subsequently, three individuals happened upon him. The first two, who were religious leaders, passed by the victim. It was the third man, a Samaritan, who helped him by bandaging his wounds and taking him to a hotel. Now a critical aspect of this story is that the Jews and the Samaritans were serious enemies. It is said that Jews would walk around the country of Samaria to get where they wanted to go even if it was quicker to go through it. Jesus poses

the moral of the story in a question: “Who acted like the victim’s neighbor?” The answer is obviously the Samaritan. Therefore, one conclusion might be that if you are my enemy, that is not a criteria that should limit my responsibility to help you. Also, a position of church leadership doesn’t mean that you will model the right way to act. In fact, the two religious leaders actually saw their own countryman as someone of no worth—at least not sufficient worth to help him. One saw the man and passed by on the other side, while the other walked over, looked at him lying there, and then also passed by on the other side. It is important to note that our responses reveal who we are. Our actions are not performed in a void. Minimally, God sees what we do and, as in the story, there is an expectation and an evaluation made on the basis of what we do.

Other examples from the Bible shed further light on criteria that might limit one from providing assistance. People came into contact with Jesus in a variety of ways. A woman with a bleeding problem approached him with faith in who he was (“If I may but touch his garments I will be cured” [Mark 5:28]). She touches him, making him “unclean,” yet he responds with caring intimacy by calling her “daughter.” If I interact with you and, as a result, I am treated as unclean (this is not a physical determination but rather a social one), that should not limit my help. It should, however, cause me to examine the traditions that would limit my help and reject those that should be rejected rather than allowing them to form me into someone who engages in unloving behavior.

A man who had been born blind had no idea who Jesus was (“Who is He, Lord, that I may believe in Him” [John 9:34]). The point being, he was not a man of faith, a follower of Jesus, although he was a temple member (we know this because, as a result of his interaction with and defense of Jesus, he was thrown out of the temple). But as a result of Jesus’ healing him, he became a follower, a man of faith in Jesus. So, faith in Jesus is not a mitigating factor to helping someone, but help might result in faith.

Another man who was “demon possessed” told Jesus to get away from him (“I beg you do not torment me” [Luke 8:28]). I have at times attempted to assist people with mental illness living on the street. I recall one man who swore angrily at people as they walked by him as he leaned on a dumpster—an image not lost on me. At first, he resisted my friendly advance, calling me “officer,” perhaps a sad indication of the only people who typically interacted with him. He repeatedly told me to leave him alone, but when I asked if I could help him in some way, I responded to his request by buying him some cigarettes. I also asked him, “Please stop shouting at people.” In other

situations, I would simply buy food and leave it with the person. From Jesus' example, anger and rejection do not limit someone being helped. Later, in Luke 8:39, the man who told Jesus to get away, after being healed, begs Jesus to let him go with him. But Jesus responds, "No, go back to your family and tell them everything God has done for you." So he went through the town proclaiming the great things Jesus had done for him.

A woman who was caught in moral failure was brought to Jesus by a lynch mob ("This woman was taken in the very act, committing adultery" [John 8:4]). Jesus' famous response, "Whoever is without sin cast the first stone," resulted in him being alone with the woman. "Go now and leave your life of sin" was how he left her (Luke 8:11). We have no knowledge of what she did next. It appears he helped her without following up on how she used the help she received. People caught clearly doing wrong and facing punishment for their behavior still received a loving response from Jesus. But people can be perceived as causing their own situation because of their "sin," which can influence a response to them.

In each of these cases, reasons for why one would not help someone were largely social in nature. Yet Jesus' response was basically the same each time: help and healing for the whole person. At times there were also demands put on those he helped, but he still helped.

Overall, then, the examples provided chide us to assist those who (1) are our sworn enemies, (2) agree with us, (3) have no faith, (4) are hostile to us, and (5) have deliberately done things against our moral code. In each of these situations, Jesus chose to reduce the caring distance between himself and those he chose to help. He didn't have to get involved but he chose to get involved. We probably couldn't know the range of what our required responses would be if the Divine had not shown what it looks like to take pity and mercy into account.

An important question to ask in light of the preceding is, is there anything that will temper or attenuate a response? The examples provided imply that assistance should be provided independent of the potentially mitigating factors described.

The Relationship Between Corporate and Individual Responses

Because of the wealth of Western society, governments are often the agent of some form of assistance. It might be important, therefore, to separate what might be called individual responses from corporate responses. By corporate,

we mean support from governments or organizations, even churches, through programs. We will then consider an example of relationships between the individual and corporate responses to people in need whom we have referred to as disenfranchised.

Ultimately, we may actually say no to a particular form of corporate help on the basis of a moral code. The “immorality” that would limit the response, however, might relate more to the question of whether the support was keeping an individual enslaved to the program by which the assistance is being provided. The Social Security Administration (SSA) of the United States discovered that their financial assistance programs to individuals with disabilities were not working as they wanted them to (Social Security, n.d.). That is, they seemed to breed dependence. It was observed that the more benefits an individual received (quite often these are individuals they were supporting), the more likely they would remain dependent upon government benefits. Now obviously there are many reasons why someone would receive many benefits, at times related to severity of disabling conditions, etc. Yet the SSA felt that to some extent their programs became a vocational disincentive to individuals with disabilities. Their efforts at helping debilitated many who used them. In response, the SSA developed a series of work-incentive programs. These programs were designed to encourage people to become less dependent upon the government and more self-sufficient through work. Incentives were designed such that people on programs were empowered to take minimal risks without having to fear the sudden cessation of their benefits, particularly their medical benefits. Our responses should be a combination of corporate and individual responses.

The above demonstrates that we also have a responsibility to see beyond the person in front of us to the “edifices” that lead to the experiences of those who are disenfranchised. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., wisely pointed this out in a 1967 speech. Dr. King stated,

On the one hand we are called to play the good Samaritan on life's roadside; but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar; it is not haphazard and superficial. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring. (Washington, 1992, p. 31)

What are the edifices that prohibit people from being enfranchised as full members of the community? There are many; however, we as the Church must take a good look at ourselves. In the context of this journal's focus on issues related to persons with disabilities, a common theme is that those with disabilities need to belong, need to be invited to friendship, and we need to embrace the edifice changes that their presence will bring. This in part comes from showing people thought less honorable the special honor described in 1 Corinthians 12:23. There is a cultural change that needs to occur within the church. We need both responses. McKnight (1994; 1977) states that the government provides services when what is needed is caring, but it is suspected that he would agree with Dr. King in that we really need both. Our efforts in doing both will result in reform in the service providers and the caring providers.

Getting back to Social Security, at some point along the way, someone made a moral decision relative to the edifice of the SSA and its recipients. Perhaps the decision was based on more of a fiscal motivation (moving people toward becoming tax payers), but at some level, someone argued that it was better for individuals with disabilities, better for their lives, for them to work than to continue to receive federal benefits and not work. Now, although benefits were not cut off, counselors were put in a position to describe the advantages of work through programs that would result in less dependence. Additionally, other case workers from a variety of agencies would see the impact of the new SSA focus and perhaps make the case, apply pressure, etc., to individuals and encourage them to participate in the program. If a program contributes to a cycle of poverty and provides a substantial disincentive to people to become independent, is it not fair to raise questions about the morality of the program?

Motivating individual aid need not compete with more systematic or collective responses, either public or private. Given that public responses remain insufficient, individual efforts are needed (and, I believe, vice versa). Moral reflection on institutions and structures is often derivative of claims about individual duties and virtues . . . Given the relative neglect of economic ethics in recent moral theology, it is helpful to follow traditional Christian casuistry and begin at an individual level in order to clarify some basic principles and virtues. Talking about individual duties need not deny the importance of communities. (Gregory, 2008, p. 32)

Corporately or individually, people may also think that responses may be attenuated on the basis of a variety of other factors. Could responses be

limited on the basis of the disenfranchised individual's responsibility for their situation? If an individual is "guilty" of some offense against morality or even a lack of common sense that led to their situation, are they therefore responsible for their own situation? Assuming they are, are potential helpers then justified in saying things like, "You knew that if you had numerous sex partners, your chance of getting AIDS would be greater!" From a Christian perspective, does "guilt" relieve society of a response or in any way limit the range of "appropriate" responses? We touched on this earlier relative to the woman caught in adultery. How many times can someone make the same mistake before we say we will no longer help them? Does the Matthew 8:22 70 x 7 principle apply here? We also recognize that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Related to this, then, does it matter what the disenfranchised individual will do with the aid given should the charity be offered? Hesitations to help someone range from "I'd give him some money, but he'd only use it to buy alcohol" to "If I buy him food, that will allow him to use any other money to buy alcohol." Some people living in poverty do indeed use government supports other than in the ways they were intended to be used. For example, it was reported that some hurricane victims in New Orleans used the government financial benefits they received ostensibly for food to purchase alcohol, pornography or jewelry. It is known in Seattle that areas of the city where people who are affected by poverty live are some of the best places to get diapers inexpensively as recipients will sell them cheaply to get money they can use for other purposes. Is it wise to give devalued or disenfranchised people resources without restrictions attached? Am I responsible for the way people use the assistance that I in good conscience give to them? Could they use the resources in such a way that they should lose them? Dorothy Day, founder of Catholic Worker, once wisely said,

And it is to be expected that virtue and destitution should go together. No, as John Cogley has written, they are the destitute in every way, destitute of the world's goods, destitute of honor, of gratitude, of love, they need so much that we cannot take the Works of Mercy apart and say I will do this one or that one Work of Mercy. We find they all go together. (Ellsberg, 1983, p. 100)

Do we just accept the fact that some people may take advantage of their benefactors? Whose actions am I responsible for: mine, theirs, or both of ours? I would be unreasonable to believe otherwise from what Dorothy

Day says. Should we be surprised when devalued people who may have come to understand themselves as devalued act with the behaviors that accompany that devaluation? It would no doubt be a difficult thing to try to break out of.

As stated, one might divide “perceivers of a situation in time” into corporate perceivers and individual perceivers. Corporate groups might be federal, state and local governments or even organizations like churches. These groups can be looked to to develop programs. Programs can result in physically accessible environments and can also provide money for subsistence living as well as needed medical services and instrumental supports (tangible help that people might provide). Governments do this through programs such as social security. Churches also will provide some instrumental supports.

Corporate responses are limited in that they can address physical needs but little besides those. They provide access to environments where the potential for social interactions are possible. They may try to encourage social integration but are limited in what they might facilitate. Few if any encourage faith community participation.

In thinking about an individual response to assist one’s neighbor, it might be helpful to consider the idea of God’s sovereignty. How is it that within the church, the body of Christ, some people have health, money, intellect and so forth and others do not? Under God’s sovereignty, life is clearly easier for some people and more difficult for others. So, what are we to do with this observation? Could it be that what is caused or permitted by God is meant to be not just for the individual but for others, for the whole body? Individual responses, then, are likely a part of God’s plan for a healthy body. I don’t experience the things I do just for me but for you as well. This is implied in 1 Corinthians 12:26. If I am in need, you should be in need too on my behalf. If I have wealth, you should have wealth to on my behalf. Clearly this is easier to state than it is to understand, unpack and do, but it illustrates God’s sovereignty in the connection between individual and corporate responses. Ours should not be the response of the rich fool (Luke 12:14-21). What we have is not just for ourselves.

As stated above, the assumption is often made that the State will provide support services, removing personal responsibility for my neighbor from me. Everything I have is then just for myself. Individual involvement and responsibility are perceived to be diminished via the support of a corporate response (e.g., governmental). Reliance on the State oftentimes results in embracing a form of learned unhelpfulness among citizens. The learned

unhelpfulness is not just constrained to the individual needing the assistance, as typically described, but also to others in the community having the potential to help.

Ebenezer Scrooge is a classic example of learned unhelpfulness as described in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (2014). Scrooge, a wealthy man, when approached by agents of a charitable foundation, remarks,

Are there no prisons? . . . And the Union work houses? . . . Are they still in operation? . . . The treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then? . . . Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course . . . I help support the establishments I have mentioned: they cost enough; and those who are badly off must go there. (p. 7)

Arguably, Scrooge has been socialized into believing that because he pays taxes his personal responsibility toward the disenfranchised, specifically the poor, in his community is reduced. Scrooge also assumes, too confidently, that his taxes are adequately providing for the needs of the poor. Now, if the poor were regularly within his midst, if they were somehow a part of his life, he would recognize that the State only provides a subsistence level of support and that much more is needed. There is a significant caring distance between him and those whom his taxes support and he has no desire to reduce that distance. As the agents of the charitable organization state,

“Many can’t go there; and many would rather die.”

“If they would rather die,” said Scrooge, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population. Besides—excuse me—I don’t know that.”

“But you might know it,” observed the gentlemen. (p. 8)

He might know it. The gentlemen understand something that Scrooge does not. A strictly corporate response is insufficient at best and does not attenuate the need for personal responses from people toward their neighbors. However, because he is sheltered from disenfranchised people, he is able to live on in his misconceptions about their value (surplus population) and how they live (union workhouses). In his mind, his personal responsibility is reduced by corporate responsibility for disenfranchised people.

The caring distance between Scrooge and those potentially benefiting from his help is so great that he is unaware of their situation. Our society—even our churches and denominations—has taken our money for programs and, through programs, has contributed to undermining notions of personal responsibility for our neighbor (McNair & McKinney, 2016). We dismiss our personal responsibility by embracing the less demanding option of giving it over to the state, or to the organization.

What is needed is some means whereby those individuals needing support can intrude upon the sheltered haven of those having the potential to provide support but are not providing it. I believe that most people if confronted with a problem will attempt to be a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem. But as the 1960s' band Ten Years After opined, "I'd love to change the world, but I don't know what to do. So I'll leave it up to you." It is easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of problems faced by people. At the same time, statements such as this in some ways betray the maker as someone who is removed from the situation, who has paid the entry fee required to be unhelpful (taxes)—ensuring a great caring distance—and so does nothing on a personal level. It could also simply be an excuse.

Referring back to Scrooge, after his interactions with the Christmas ghosts, he immediately saw needs his taxes had not addressed. The ghosts brought him into direct contact with Bob Cratchit's situation. As a result, he chose to use his resources to purchase a goose, to buy toys for the children, to assist with medical services for Tiny Tim, etc., greatly reducing the caring distance between he and the Cratchits. Additionally, he sought out the agents of the charitable foundation and made a generous contribution. That is, Scrooge recognized that individually he could supplement corporate help; he could provide assistance only an individual could provide. He came to love the Cratchit family! McKnight (1977; 1994) again describes this difference we see in Scrooge's providing services when what is needed is caring. One should not misunderstand. Government supports are critical. However, one should also not confuse services with caring.

Breaking out of his learned unhelpfulness, Scrooge recognized that paying taxes does not release him from responsibility for his neighbor. When I do what the government demands by paying taxes, that does not mean that I have a heart toward those to whom some of that money flows. It is interesting in this regard how some politicians will demand increases in taxes to "help" people while at the same time their personal charitable contributions are quite small. When I do what the law requires, that doesn't mean I have

had a change of heart. For example, when churches put in handicapped parking spaces, wheelchair-accessible restrooms and ramps, once again that does not necessarily demonstrate that their hearts have changed toward persons with disabilities, as these are government-required actions.

Corporate responses have largely taken the form of governmental agencies and philanthropic organizations. As a nation, we take philosophical positions relative to disenfranchised individuals. Statements are made such as, “No child should go to bed hungry in the United States,” but we plan on doing little ourselves individually. Should sufficient voting members of the nation feel this way, the government acts to develop programs to meet these needs. Corporate members act corporately by funding the programs via taxes or charitable contributions. Rather than encouraging individual involvement as an evidence of someone loving their neighbor, we perceive the need for a personal response being attenuated. The caring distance between individuals is very great and remains so, to the point that like Scrooge, persons paying taxes, etc., not only may not know specific individuals who are beneficiaries of the programs, but they may not even know what programs and services are being provided. It seems that paying taxes can cause someone to draw false conclusions.

Conclusion

For those who believe in the teachings of the Bible, there is another compelling reason to assist disenfranchised individual. That is, we will be judged on the basis of our responses to those in need. The classic phrase “whatever you did to the least of these, my brothers, you did to me” was Jesus’ comment. The scene we originally referenced in Matthew 25 goes on to separate people on the basis of how they helped others with (1) physical needs: food and drink; (2) social needs: being a stranger and needing clothes; and (3) emotional needs: being visited when sick or in prison. Interestingly, those who get the good evaluation in that passage don’t question whether they individually helped people in each of the areas listed above (compare the way in which the word “you” is used in reference to the two groups). They perhaps just didn’t fully comprehend the complexity of their situation in time in which absolute ideals are enmeshed, in that their responses to those in need had significantly greater implications and ramifications *to themselves* than perhaps they ever imagined. Apparently, if you help the disenfranchised, you somehow help Jesus himself (Matthew 25:40). If a basic criteria for a successful life is what one has done for the least of these, then those who

have done for the least of these have, in a critical area, lived a successful life, or have at least had their lives bettered.

Jesus, in John 9:5, provides a partial answer as to why there are disenfranchised individuals in the world. Regarding the man born blind, the passage states, “this happened that the works of God should be made manifest in him, we must work the works of Him that sent me, while it is still day; the night cometh when no man can work.” Part of the complexity of the situation is that every one of us is in need at some time in our lives and is in the world so that we might be responded to and, through that response, the works of God may be made manifest. Governments may do things that support a Christian position toward the disenfranchised. However, arguably it is through our personal assistance that the works of God are made manifest.

Understanding the complexity of a situation will impact responses to people in need. Complexity involves the situation itself (hunger, disability, unwanted pregnancy, etc.), the individual in the situation, the caring distance amongst individuals relative to the situation, and the ability amongst individuals to apply resources to the situation. Additionally, responses will be impacted by understanding the spiritual, social and physical dimensions and positions relative to guilt and individual or corporate responsibilities. We are commanded to love our neighbor (Mark 12:31).

So, who is to be responsible to those in need? We are so that the works of God may be seen in disenfranchised individuals and that we might be on the right side of the goat/sheep fence at the final judgment. But it all begins with seeing the “complexity of any given situation . . . in which an absolute ideal is enmeshed.”

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