

I Heard a Frightening Silence

As a preacher I frequently receive calls at my office from strangers with needs. I have been asked to visit someone's relative in the hospital (a person I did not know). I have been asked to provide transportation for people I did not know. One stranger asked me to take her unruly dog. People have been asked for assistance with food, clothes, rent, utilities, air conditioners, gasoline and prescriptions for medication. Most often people just want money.

I have had a number of occasions in which people have lied to me and selfishly taken what was given them; a few times, my own money. I have observed that some people ask for help with necessities while hiding their undisciplined spending on entertainment, junk food and 'extras.' As a result I have learned to be more cautious. In fact, I have learned to listen for clues that would tip me off to made-up stories and lies.

On one occasion a lady called the church building and asked for money and then added, "If you don't help me, my children will not have Christmas presents this year."

Judge me if you wish, but that week I had already heard three sob stories that just did not check out. Utility bill, rent, food. But now, money for some lady's kids' Christmas? Really!? She sounded rehearsed, like a salesman's spiel.

I paused briefly trying to gather my thoughts wondering what to say. I blurted out the first thing that came into my mind (not generally a good idea), "Will you be putting my name in the 'From:' line on the 'To / From' card?"

She hung up.

Perhaps mine was a clever response to yet another undisciplined swindler, yet perhaps there was a legitimate need. I don't know. I didn't

probe further. I treated her lightly and she hung up, releasing me from any further obligation. I had displayed an attitude of: "Whatever."

My thoughts sway to and fro when I think of the 'Christmas lady.'

I feel a little guilty, not because I refused to buy her kids gifts, but because I cast her aside so quickly. She will not be soon forgotten. She reminds me that I need to inquire with kindness, to probe deeper into the situation. I can still be frank and ask pointed questions that might uncover a fraud, but I need to ask with gentleness and real concern. I need to watch my attitude.

**He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor
Will also cry himself and not be answered.**

--Proverbs 21:13

I am quite sure that God does not expect anyone to simply throw their money away to swindlers. Yet, when people ask, I need to remember that God is deeply concerned about the poor. And those who are stingy will experience a frightening silence in their time of need.

So, reflecting on this Proverb and the 'Christmas lady,' I have reasoned: *If in the future I misjudge a situation, I would much rather give generously to someone who has no real need than to withhold from someone who is truly poor and in need.* Then I can be assured that in my time of poverty, God will not turn a deaf ear to me.

I want to be wise.

I want to refrain from being judgmental.

I want to be generous.

I want to be heard...