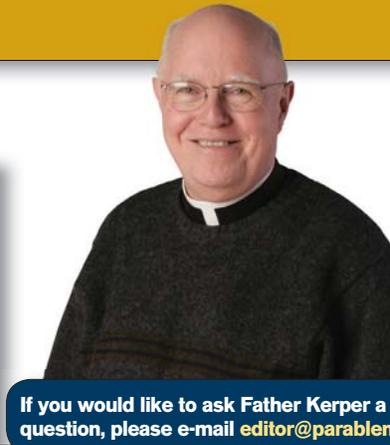


# Dear Fr. Kerper

## Do we have to give money to every beggar who comes along?



If you would like to ask Father Kerper a question, please e-mail [editor@parablen](mailto:editor@parablen.com)

►► **Dear Father Kerper:** In the Gospels, Jesus seems to demand that we give money to every beggar who comes along. Should we take his words literally? I'm not rich, and some of these people hit me for a donation whenever I walk down the street. I feel guilty when I don't give them anything. Am I sinning by not responding to their appeal?

In a wonderful way, your question reveals your own basic goodness. You have listened carefully to the words of Jesus, and you acknowledge that his words lay claim to your whole life, including your dealings with people in need. You also experience the tension between the Lord's seemingly impossible demands and your own limited resources.

Let's begin with the matter of taking the words of Jesus "literally." The Gospels do indeed tell us that Jesus said things like: "Give to anyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from someone who takes it," (Luke 6:30) and "Sell your possessions and give to those in need." (Luke 12:33)

Also, the requirement to assist the poor is powerfully reinforced by two of Jesus' parables.

The first is the Lord's depiction of the last judgment. (Matthew 25:31-46) Here, Jesus states that the sole criterion for salvation or damnation is a person's response to the hungry, needy, grieving, and so on. His words are sharp: "In truth I tell you, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me." (Matthew 25:47)

The second is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. (Luke 16:19-31) Jesus paints a terrifying picture of a man condemned forever, apparently because of a single sin: neglect of one poor man in need.

These passages, especially when combined with numerous other texts in both testaments, clearly teach us that every believer must give freely to the needy. This is a non-negotiable, though often overlooked, requirement of the Gospel. Why?

Jesus forcefully insists on almsgiving as a means of changing our vision of other people and ourselves. In fact, true conversion means changing one's entire outlook on reality.

When Christians freely give alms to a stranger, they see the person, no matter how unattractive, as a living image of Christ. This happens through the mystery of the Incarna-

tion, the unity of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Because humanity has an essential unity, everyone – regardless of belief or moral condition – has some connection with Christ. The act of almsgiving, then, acknowledges and honors Christ within the other.

Almsgiving also changes our self-image by allowing us to see ourselves as "God-like." Perhaps this sounds blasphemous, but various biblical passages make the same point. Here's just one: "You must therefore set no bounds to your love, just as your heavenly Father sets none on his." (Matthew 5:48) To put it another way, by giving to the poor, especially to one person, we activate our God-given power to reflect God's own generous love in the world.

Now, to practical matters. You ask whether a Christian must literally follow the Lord's command "to give to all who ask."

Here we must move beyond specific situations to general patterns of behavior. Considering the biblical passages cited, especially Matthew 25 and the Lazarus parable, one must conclude that some sort of personal assistance to people in need is absolutely required. How one does this is another matter.

Some people, say Mother Teresa or Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, discern a special vocation from God to deal with poor and broken people in a face to face way. People like them do heroic work and manifest God's generosity in an especially luminous way. But what about everyone else?

To find that answer for yourself, I would suggest that you examine

your finances and personal time. Ask yourself these questions:

What portion of my income goes to charity? Here I would include not only contributions to groups that help the poor, but also financial gifts to needy neighbors, relatives, co-workers, and even strangers on the street. Almsgiving that comes entirely from one's excess is nice, but true almsgiving should involve the diminishment and simplification of one's own lifestyle. For example, could I skip my \$3 latte by giving the money to a beggar?

Some people excuse themselves from helping panhandlers by arguing that the money will be misused. Please remember that the Lord requires charitable acts, not effective social work. A gift given in love has great value, even when bestowed upon a con artist.

Do I spend time with people in need? For sure, Jesus speaks of material help, but his main interest is not economic. It's personal. Every Christian needs a Lazarus, a person who can claim their attention and concern, not just their money. Such a person may be right in front of you. As Mother Teresa once said to a woman who wanted to share in her work, "My dear friend, Calcutta is in your own living room."

You also asked about sin. Some sins are evil actions. Other sins are failures to be what God has empowered us to be. Regarding personal assistance to the poor, we sin tragically by failing to see Christ in the other and, perhaps worse, by failing to allow God's goodness to flow through us to the other.

— Father Michael Kerper is the pastor of Corpus Christi Parish in Portsmouth.