The Beggar and the Caveman Christian **[1]**

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In his poem *The Beggar*, Tatamkhulu Afrika, a devout Muslim, writes of one day going into the city for his day's business. On his way he encounters a beggar who, naturally, asks him for money. The narrator has no time for this distraction and brushes off the annoyance. However, his entire day is spoiled by his conscience nagging at him over his treatment of the beggar. On his way home, he encounters the same beggar and, mistaking him for drunk, curtly gives him alms. The beggar thanks him, and his conscience is in turmoil again, not for his inaction, but the reluctance and selfishness in which he acted: when he gave the alms, he did not do it because he cared for the beggar, but because he wanted to soothe his own conscience.

Many people, especially Christians, can relate to the narrator in this poem. In the gospels Jesus repeated emphasises the importance of mercy to the weak and disenfranchised. Unlike Islam, alms giving does not form a "pillar" (Zakāt) of the faith. But it is supposed to flow from the grace and transformation which comes from the indwelling Holy Spirit. Still, many find it difficult to do. It is easier to donate to a charity or church and expect them to redistribute it. In South Africa in particular, we distrust beggars, believing that our best intentions will be used to buy alcohol or drugs. We have heard stories of people being given food, only to throw it away around the corner, and of donated clothes being sold for money to feed a drug habit. We have even heard stories of those who prefer begging, because in a country with more than 25% unemployment, begging is more lucrative that trying to ply some trade.

Working with the poor in the South African context definitely requires discernment and wisdom. This does not, however, absolve the Christian from caring for their fellow man created in God's image (whether they are Christians, addicts, lucid or not). The Christian needs to care about people. And often people do not need money so much as attention. And so "throwing money at the problem" is not always the best solution.

"Time is money", as the old adage goes. For many, their money will run out long before their time. However, those who have reached the end of their lives with much money left over, will recognise that they cannot trade the one for the other (although they did likely spend most of their lives trading in the opposite direction). And so because of this, we are very protective of our time. And our times spent interacting with beggars has less to do with an unwillingness to give than to listen.

I have been in Afrika's position more than I like, and reflecting upon it, I believe that I have found the primary reason why I react the same as Afrika's narrator. While some see street beggars as

irresponsible vagabonds who are—socially—lost causes, for me the problem is less philosophical and more selfish1: they are disrupting my plan.

I usually structure my goings out strictly: *go to A, do this; go to B, get that; go home*. Like Rob Becker's caveman [2], I am goal-orientated; I go out into hostile fields, block myself off from distractions, find my target, "kill" it, and drag is back to the safety of my cave, where I can feast on my accomplishment. The beggar who crosses the street to engage me and ask for my help, or who sits huddled in a corner with loneliness and rejection as his only companions, distracts me from my goal and disrupts my planning; which can be lethal!

This, of course, is a subjective experience and is pronounced by my introversion. But it is not an attitude fit for a Christian: it is not right to segregate one's time in ministry and non-ministry, into social justice and non-social justice, into mercy and non-mercy (Luke 6:35–36; 2 Timothy 4:2). The solution is simple: before leaving the safety of the cave, prepare to expect such encounters. One might go out expecting to hunt a deer but come across a mammoth. But while the solution is simple, this might well be my Everest to conquer.

In closing, if your struggle is like mine, there are a few things which you can do in order to remain faithful God's desire for His people and Christ's charge to each of us:

1. The first is to recognise the entrapment of personal comfort and see it not as something positive, but negative.
2. Be aware of what resources you have available, which is *not* just the money in your pocket. Educate yourself about homeless shelters in your area, and which programmes and initiatives are available to use.
3. Listen. Even if you do get conned, if you pay attention, eventually you'll be the wiser one. It is incredibly difficult to lie consistently and, if you encounter the same people regularly enough, then, over time, you will get to know who are the con artists and who are the ones genuinely in need.
4. When you are done listening, say or do something encouraging. It could be giving alms, or telling someone that they look nice or that you are proud of them. You never know what an impact it could have on someone [3].
5. However, do not *expect* appreciation or kindness in return. We are charged to loved the world, and not only when love is returned to us.
6. And if you really want to get involved, get involved in adult education initiatives: if you are reading this, there is a very good chance that you have advanced skills and education (which you may even take for granted) which you can share with others. Even with a 25% unemployment rate, the person who can read, cook, balance a budget, weld, play a piano or use a spreadsheet programme will have far better chances at finding employment (or creating self-employment) than those who can't.

Lastly, try not to do these things out of Christian duty, but out of love for humanity.

- 1. Although, because I self-identify with Luke 16:3, there often is a socio-philosophical aspect for me as well.

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