

When Helping is Actually Hurtful

This is perhaps one of the biggest arguments in the Rescue Mission Ministry family and probably one of the larger areas of ambivalence within the staff. Rescue Missions often receive criticism from secular human service agencies for our practice of requiring some participation from those seeking help. The practice of “providing for” versus “providing with,” when seen as the answer to presented needs, is ultimately detrimental to the recipient’s growth and well-being. Little by little, our country is awakening to the shocking truth that unconditional financial relief does not alleviate poverty or homelessness.

Scripture says in many places and in many ways that we are to meet the needs of those who are impoverished. The same Bible that says I am not to turn away from a brother in need. (1 John 3:17) also says, "The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat." (2 Thessalonians 3:10 (NIV)). Scripture never disagrees with itself. Our responsibility is to study the Word to find the real meanings of the teachings. We need to understand what real need is before we will know how best to meet that need. Scripture teaches, “Man shall not live on bread alone.” (Matthew 4:4; Luke 4:4). Jesus is here quoting from Deuteronomy 8:3, where God actually says He allowed need so He could teach an important truth. We do not need to go around creating needs! Our folks have plenty. We must discern what the real need is before we just do band-aids.

If we do not get this right, the recipient feels controlled and the giver feels deceived. If I help in a way that is not helpful, the recipient does not learn healthy coping strategies since the solution to the problem is provided with no effort on his part. If I force a solution on the recipient, I have merely pulled a drowning person out of the water but have not taught him either how to swim or why not to get himself in danger again. Doing for a person what they can do for themselves is demeaning, disrespectful, and crippling. Rescue Missions understand the long-term benefit of giving a hand-up rather than a handout.

When the helper is working harder than the helpee, the helpee is in a coasting mode and the result is no personal progress. The helper is becoming a crutch on whom the helpee is becoming dependent. When I find myself working harder on the person’s problems than they are working, I need to take a step back and reevaluate whether I am helping or hurting.

If we do not personally get a solid handle on this, the result may affect our own attitudes. I have watched those on the front lines who have not had a grip on this truth descend into the ditch of disappointment and discouragement. When I am the one meeting another’s need without their participation, any of the following can capture my heart and result in resentment and cynicism:

- Critical spirit as I observe a lack of progress
- Expectation of gratitude that never comes

- Development of resentment towards the recipient
- Impatience with perceived slothfulness
- Irritation with complaints, justified or unjustified
- Jealousy of any positive results
- Perpetuity of my own grandiosity

I get bigger in my own eyes and they get smaller
see this as a “thankless job” rather than a



and more insignificant. I begin to
ministry unto the Lord.

Analysis

Why are we helping? What is the goal? Here are some samples of goals we might have:

- Make the hurt go away?
- Increase knowledge of available resources?
- Acquire skills for meaningful life?
- Growth in responsibility, tenacity?
- Development of gratitude?
- Acquire freedom and self-reliance?
- Restore people to experiencing humanness in the way God intended?

All these are good answers. Yet do they individually address the real need? Brian Filkert, in his book When Helping Hurts, specified four areas. “The crucial thing is to help people to understand their identity as image bearers, to love their neighbors as themselves, to be stewards over God’s creation, and to bring glory to God in all things” (Brian Filkert p.145). What you determine to be your goal will determine the direction you take and ultimately the impact you will have.

What outcomes would we actually like to see? Seeing enhanced human dignity? Trusting relationships formed? Increased self-sufficiency? Point #1 of Analysis is to determine the “why” which helps us determine the “what.”

Next, my definitions have to be correct. What is my definition of addiction? What is my definition of poverty? What is the meaning of “need” and “helping?” How I define these and how I see the human condition affects how I help and how I help affects the impact I will have. Do I understand God’s meaning of “grace” and “mercy,” “truth” and “love?”

Many secularists define addiction as a disease. I define addiction as a worship disorder. When I am addicted, I am participating in idol worship, substituting something or someone in the place of my God. My practice of my addiction may well cause disease in my life and I will need to deal with both the surface and the root issues.

Poverty is defined quite differently depending on your own “condition.” Research has shown a wide variation in the definition of poverty given by those who have material resources and those who do not. The former generally believe that poverty is best defined as lack of sufficient material resources. The words used by those with minimal financial means when asked to describe poverty include “shame, inferiority, fear, powerlessness, humiliation, hopelessness, depression, isolation and voicelessness.”.

Filkert refers to a “loss of meaning, purpose, and hope.” Bryant Myers, in his book Walking With the Poor describes poverty as “the result of relationships that do not work, that are not just, that are not for life, that are not harmonious or enjoyable.” (p.86)

Filkert makes a compelling case that poverty is the result of brokenness in four key relationships: with God, with self, with others, and with the rest of creation. If one of my goals is to address poverty and if I agree with this definition, then I will need to do far more than meet the crisis need in the individual seeking help.

Lack of full disclosure, for instance, is dishonesty. Self-reliance means that with God’s help I can do this. Choosing to have my life and actions exposed to the light is personal accountability. When I start to define terms from God’s perspective, I begin to see that loving someone unconditionally means I am doing what is best for the person, which may include putting down some conditions for behavior. I must have a firm grip on what is truth when it comes to the terms that are thrown around or else I will be crushed with accusations such as “and I thought you were a Christian.”

Next we discern the appropriate response... A crisis response calls for something different from an ongoing need. Is there really a crisis or is this a learned way of working the system? Am I teaching responsibility? How have I encouraged the person to take some piece in the solution? Have I inadvertently removed the sting of tough love and consequently removed opportunity for growth? Have I discerned whether the person is capable of providing answers, or do I observe a learned skill of undermining? Am I addressing the temptation of greed by checking if there is a practice of accessing other assistance? Discern, and then plan not to feed into the problem while searching for a solution.

Both my goals and my definitions will affect how I learn to help without hurting. I will also need to be alert to the results of my own behaviors toward those I wish to help. Am I promoting self-reliance and accountability or am I accepting irresponsibility, dependency, and dishonesty? Do I need to be needed? When a person fails, do I take it personally? These soul-searching questions point toward our own attitudes that move us from helping to hurting.



In addition to analyzing My Goals...
My Definitions...
The Situation...

I need to analyze ME

My motivations, attitudes, beliefs

Solutions

First, I need to get my perspective aligned with God's perspective. To see the person as God sees them and to see myself as God sees me.

Those who are blessed with imperfect vision or have lived long enough for vision to start to wear out know that when you go for an eye exam, the doctor determines the prescription by asking you to choose between one frame and another, which one is clearer, which one is not. We desire to see clearly. Sometimes evaluation and correction are necessary. What we believe we see influences our actions.

The problem is we all have limited vision. The prophet told Jacob, "God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD (NIV)). Do I see the person in front of me as resources? Or do I see them as God's creation, I see them as choice making individuals?



looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7 impoverished? Needy? Having no made in His image, with abilities? Do

We gain wisdom if we are regularly looking at how Jesus did ministry. Jesus frequently went about meeting real needs and refusing to address unreal needs. But in every situation the solution to the perceived need was bigger than first met the human eye. There was always more to it. Since you are in a place where you see need and are attempting to meet that need, Jesus provides great examples.

- Open to exposing the actual problem when healing man with withered hand, Mark 3:3-5
- Utilized the help of the whole team when feeding 4000+, Matthew 15:32-38
- Did not focus attention on His own needs, Mark 10:45
- Made sure the recipient knew the source of the help when feeding the 5000++, John 6:32

If you, the staff person or the mission, is getting the kudos for supplying the client's needs, you are missing the boat. When the client knows the provision is coming from the Lord, there is greater opportunity for gratitude and less grumbling and game playing.

Clark Blakeman, Director of Second Stories, with CRCNA Global Missions asks, "What is wrong with the old saying: Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day; teach a man to fish and he will eat forever? Does the man already have some ideas how to fish but just hasn't been able to get the equipment needed? Or does he have the needed equipment and does not realize it yet?" What does the person we want to help already have available to them? Do we give the fish, or teach the skill of fishing, or do we help the person to move toward owning the pond?

There is a great difference between providing service to or for the client and providing service with the client. What might happen if you are providing service for the clients?

- Alleviate immediate needs, not long-term need
- Moving toward the person
- Opportunity for your own self-satisfaction
- Unstructured assistance

- Develop dependency
- Promote increased need

How does that differ from providing services with the client?

- Address the real need rather than a perceived need
- Promote decision-making in their own lives
- Relationship develops with give and take
- Improves person's sense of self-worth
- Time-consuming
- Incorporates the gifts of both
- Room for failure acceptable
- Empowers client to problem solve on their own

If my helping comes in the form of “doing to” the client, it is seen as coercion and at best the client does what I want as long as I am around but real change does not happen. If I insist on “doing for” the client, I at best become the consultant and I invite mere compliance. But if I move toward the practice of “doing with” the client, I encourage cooperation and change.

How can we move from “for” to “with?” We need to respond to the crisis but lean toward change, accountability, personal decision-making and commitment. Instead of the “what can we do to help you?” approach, we move to a “let's sit down and diagnose the problem to find a solution.” In this way we invite ownership of the problem and the solution. How might I lead by stepping back and helping the person identify and utilize their strengths? How can we include the reciprocity principle of receiving and giving? Making contracts with a statement of what to expect from the client before the next action on the part of the staff person, ensures better collaboration.