

The epistle to James says: *My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?*

Never leap to conclusions. Ever.

You never know who you are making a judgement about. Believe me. I know.

In every church, there is someone who is sort of deputized to deal with the people who come in and ask for money.

In my last church it was NOT the Rector – who was known to be a soft touch. How did I know this? When people call to ask for money—they asked for him. By name.

And I'm here to tell you—they NEVER asked for me.

I admit it—I'm jaded— and skeptical--- when it comes to people trying to get money. I've worked at many churches, and I've heard all the stories:

"My mother (or husband, or child) is sick at XYZ hospital and I'm on my way there from --- somewhere across the country----and I ran out of money and my car is almost on empty. I just need 10 dollars to fill up so I can get to her (or him, or their child) to the hospital."

It would be poignant if I hadn't heard it about 120 times.

At another church where I worked, someone bought that story- against my advice-- and gave the person 20 dollars for "gas". 15 minutes later, when I got off work, I saw the same person buying cigarettes at the corner drug store with the money. She just grinned at me.

Or the woman who said she needed a night in a hotel because she had a job interview, and had been sleeping in the woods- and kept getting robbed. It was a hundred degree day and she had two dogs in the car. So I did it. For the dogs. 20 minutes after she left, there were two more cars in the parking lot—both needing hotel rooms. Both said they had been sleeping in the woods. Both with animals in their cars. You can see why I've gotten skeptical.

One of my favorite experiences was the lady who was asking tourists for money at St. Patrick's cathedral in NYC-- because said she was hungry and just wanted a bite. She did look emaciated. I offered to take her next door to a deli. She spit on me.

I am so jaded.

But I read these stories in the bible about not judging, about giving to all who ask and I feel terribly guilty. I feel like I'm a bad person. Too judgmental. Too untrusting.

Then one week about two years ago, we had a funeral.

The funeral had just concluded and everyone had left except the family, and one of them came to my office and said there was someone who needed assistance. It was Friday. No one was in the office. Except "the tightwad". I said I'd deal with it.

There was a youngish man with a cane who said he was a disabled vet. His car had run out of gas. Here we go again. One of the family members from the funeral said he would take this -- complete stranger--in his car to get gas. I said I couldn't allow him to do that.

I apologized to the person with the gasless car and said--"I'm sorry, but I can't allow a person from this church to get into a car with a person they do not know **at all** to buy them some gas. I told him that it was Friday--and there was no one there to give him money for gas. Which was true.

The look that crossed his face was indescribable, like he was used to people not believing him. Most people just looked mad. He looked.. weary.

"I don't need your money," he said, "I just need gas. I'm supposed to pick up my daughter at school at 3:45." It was 3:30. He continued, "My car is pulled in to a driveway just down the street with the hazards on."

He sighed, clearly discouraged. "If someone just has a gas can... "

I had a gas can. I lived right down the street.

So I told him I would go and get it. I got it and went to the gas station, filled it, and met him at his car--which--as he said--was in a driveway with the hazards on. He gratefully filled his car with enough gas to pick up his daughter and get to a gas station.

Jesus said to the Syrophenecian woman, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs."

And Jesus changed his mind. He changed it because that woman in front of him changed his mind.

And that disabled vet changed me. I hadn't even thought to ask him for his name. That really bothered me afterward. I never even asked him his name. Then I realized that he was the face of Christ opening me up to hearing the difference between a con and real need. Ephphtha. Be opened.

God, may we always be open to giving real kindness and help to the real need in the world. And Lord, change our minds when we need them to be. Open our hardened hearts.

Amen.