

# Work or Handouts: How to Help Those in Need

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | July 17, 2019



In my 2018 blog, [The Benefits of Work](#), I described how work benefits people in multiple ways. Today, I want to explore a different aspect of work — and the lack thereof.

In Eden, before sin — a perfect world — God gave Adam and Eve work to do. Human beings are created in God's image, and God is a creator. In the likeness of God, we have a built-in desire to be industrious, to engage in meaningful activity, and to use our energy, creativity, and ingenuity to build, construct, devise, make, or otherwise produce something of value, consequence, or purpose.

Such creativity is built into our being, and when we do engage in meaningful activity, whether it be work for the sake of making money to provide for one's family, or gardening, because one loves flower, or drawing, painting, writing, playing music, caring for animals, being a homemaker, or any of a myriad of other industrious activities, we experience growth and a greater sense of wellbeing, meaning, and purpose as human beings. Our sense of wellbeing, of usefulness, of confidence, and even joy all increase.

When we are active, industrious, and engaged in meaningful employment (not necessarily for pay), we are healthier, happier, and experience greater peace.

Conversely, idleness, a failure to engage one's abilities in development or meaningful application, is damaging to one's wellbeing. It undermines a person's dignity, while increasing feelings of inadequacy, guilt, shame, and worthlessness, which leads to pleasure-seeking and other acting-out behaviors in an attempt to alleviate the sense of inadequacy. As the old saying goes, *idle hands are the devil's workshop*.

Doing nothing, refusing to engage in constructive activity, and not investing one's energies and abilities into meaningful employment (when one is capable), degrades the human being. Understanding this, what action could people take if they wanted to demoralize others — to destroy other people's dignity and undermine their God-given individuality? They could take away their usefulness, take away their meaningful employment, and create programs or systems that free the capable from useful labor. They could promote public policies designed to give money, food, clothing, housing, cell phones, cars, and a variety of other resources to otherwise capable people who choose not to work.

I want to be clear: I am not concerned about politics; I am concerned about people — about their health, wellbeing, and integrity.

Throughout time, many others have recognized what I'm saying here:

- "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." — The apostle Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3:10
- "If we take the route of the permanent handout, the American character will itself be impoverished." — Richard Nixon, Republican, 37th President of the USA
- "Working moms, and increasingly working dads, don't want a government handout, but they do need a hand up." — Madeleine Kunin, Democrat, Governor of Vermont and U.S. Ambassador to Switzerland
- "The desperately poor may accept handouts, because they feel they have to. For those who consider themselves at least middle class, however, anything that smacks of a handout is not desired. Instead, they want their economic power back." — Robert Shiller, Nobel Laureate in Economics and Sterling Professor of Economics at Yale
- "At Year Up, our students — low income 18- to 24-year-olds — come to us having already faced substantial obstacles in life. They are not in search of a handout; what they want most of all is the ability to take ownership of their own futures." Gerald Chertavian, founder and CEO of Year Up; has worked with urban youth for more than 25 years.

I have seen the destruction of wellbeing, the demoralization that occurs when people are given things that they could otherwise earn — whether it be from well-meaning parents, family, friends, church members, or society. When we receive handouts that we don't believe we merit, we experience guilt, loss of esteem, a falling sense of worth, and often feel guilt and inadequacy. This leads to an unconscious need to alleviate the guilt with justification for the handout, contributing to either a sense of entitlement and identifying oneself as being downtrodden, mistreated, or wronged in the past and, thus, the handout is simply compensation and is deserved, or by experiencing physical or mental symptoms of illness that justifies the handout.

Let me be clear here as well: I am not saying that there are no people suffering from real physical and mental illness; there are, and they need our compassion and help. What I am saying is that when handouts are received by those who could otherwise provide for themselves, it causes in them a need to justify the handout, and this can take a variety of forms — either by seeing oneself as deserving, because of some perceived social injustice, or by experiencing some physical or mental problem.

## A Case Study

It is a difficult thing for compassionate people to know where to draw the line between helping someone and withholding our help. Years ago I was asked to see a woman on the dialysis unit. She was 68 years old and was suffering from renal failure; she needed dialysis three times per week. I was being consulted because the nephrologist was concerned that the patient was depressed and had given up on living. She lay in bed and basically did nothing for herself and was regressing more each day.

When I went to evaluate her, it was difficult to enter her room, because it was filled with loving, concerned, and attentive family. But after my evaluation, I had her transferred to the psychiatric unit, primarily to remove her family from her.

Within the first 30 minutes of the patient being on the psychiatric unit, the nurse call-light illuminated, indicating that the patient needed help. I happened to still be in the unit, so I went into her room with the nurse. This sick lady, with quivering voice, said pitifully, "Will you put my glasses on my face?"

Now, any compassionate person, any caring person, any person with any degree of heart realizing that this woman is suffering from a terrible illness would instantly jump to her aid and put her glasses on her face, which is exactly what her family was doing. However, what you need to realize is that this woman had to reach over her glasses in order to push the nurse call-light. Therefore, I instructed the nurse not to put her glasses on her face and to stop doing anything for this lady; that she was actually capable of doing it for herself. By the end of the week, this woman was not only up out of bed, but she was also assisting in the unit cafeteria, setting and clearing the tables for meals, participating in groups, and keeping her room straightened up. She had gone from despondent and hopeless to smiling and hopeful. She had real disability, real sickness, real limitations, yet she still had the ability to engage in many meaningful activities. Her sense of wellbeing required her to continue to do for herself and others what she was legitimately capable of doing. Her family had her best interest at heart; they wanted only to help, yet doing for the patient what she could do for herself only infantilized her and accelerated her decline.

This holds true for all people. When we love other people, we want to provide for them that which restores them to the greatest level of functioning and wellbeing possible for their actual situation and condition. Thus, love often *withholds* help in order for the individual to maintain or develop their own abilities.

When the devil cannot get good-hearted people to choose evil, he seeks to use other means to cause harm. One strategy is to overwork good people with good projects to the point they burn out and are removed from office. But another strategy is to get good-hearted people to give to people who could otherwise provide for themselves and, thus, demoralize the recipient.

When the Bible speaks of taking care of the less fortunate, the widow, and the orphan, it is not speaking of making them helpless dependents of the state. It's speaking of giving them opportunity for growth, for development of character, and for the exercising of their individuality and dignity as children of God.

When the widows, Naomi and Ruth, needed food, how did they get their need met? They gleaned for it. It was free food, yet they had to go out and work the field in order to get it. This is the biblical method, providing opportunity and resources, yet still requiring the recipient to do as much for themselves in the process as they are capable of doing.

I encourage you, with hearts of love, to seek to help others, but not to give them simply what they say they want — give them handouts — but to give each person what will help them develop their greatest potential in God's kingdom. This is hard, because it requires we actually get to know people, but maybe that has been God's plan all along.