

(Un)righteous anger

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I got a phone call and it made me angry. It was a follow-up call from a local agency that helps people in trouble in our community. I had phoned them a while back, hoping for some context, some background on a particular couple who was asking our church for material assistance. But they hadn't had time to respond and a decision had to be made. The people I was talking to were desperate. They couldn't wait.

"Yeah, we know all about _____," they said. "It's always the crack cocaine with them." I sighed. "They got some big inheritance from a relative this summer . . . well over a hundred grand. But it just all went into partying . . . up in smoke—literally! We've tried to help them in so many ways. . . . Their kids have been taken away from them so many times. . . . But they just keep going back to the same old things."

I heard these words, and I was angry.

I was angry because I hate being lied to. I had sat with these people while they told me the most heart wrenching of stories, through tears and snot and sadness. I had sat with them while they spoke of the many noble ways in which they were trying to move forward. I had sat with them while they pleaded for "anything you can do, anything at all, we have no food, no house, no nothin.'" And then, my credit card and I had done what we could. It felt like a Band-Aid solution at the time, but it was something, right? Something for the sadness and the snot and the tears? Something to help them keep limping along. And was any of it true? Probably not. At least not much. Maybe the snot.

I was angry because I hate being manipulated. I don't like to think of myself as gullible, but they had clearly gotten precisely what they wanted out of me. They knew that Christians were supposed to be good people who did good things for poor people. They knew that Christian *pastors*, of all people, could quite reliably be counted on to bring a whole bunch of misplaced guilt and obligatory compassion to

situations like this. They knew that with the right combination of emotion and storytelling, that I would be appropriately wearied by the burdens of goodness, and would help.

I was angry because I hate being [the judge](#), the gatekeeper, the one who must evaluate who is or is not worthy of the church's benevolent aid. I hate how situations like these always have built-in barriers—barriers between haves and have-nots, donors and clients, rich and poor, able and unable, etc. I hate it that it so often feels like everything that is said to me in these situations is filtered through the lens of "how can this make them give me what I want?" Or, from the other end, "How can my response to these people in need make me feel better about myself as a good Christian who helps poor people?"

I was angry because as soon as these people had received what they wanted from me, they had not responded to any of my calls, had not said "thank you" for the church's assistance, had not said or done *anything* that would have indicated even the slightest desire for an ongoing relationship with me or with the church. They had gotten what they wanted. I was no further use to them.

I was angry as I thought about their kids, bouncing from foster home to foster home. I was angry because it is so often kids who suffer for the sins of their parents.

So yes, I was angry. And I sat in my chair, looking hard-hearted out my window, inwardly resolving to be more suspicious from now on, to ask better questions, to not be so gullible, to be more stingy with the church's aid, to be a better judge.

There I sat, marinating in my righteous anger.

And then I began to think about the ways in which I often come to God. I thought about how often I come to God demanding things, help, wisdom, *anything*—particularly when I have made a spectacular mess. I thought of how often I make the same mistakes, over and over and over again. I thought about my own cherished habits of selfishness, sin, and stupidity. I thought about how reliably I can often make decisions that hurt myself and those around me.

I thought about what it might be like if I had to exhibit "appropriate need" or "demonstrable initiative/progress" in order for God to grant me an audience. About what it might be like if I had to provide proof that I was managing my meager resources with suitable competence before my case would get a hearing. About

what it might be like if God or others in my own life would apply the same standard to me that I was self-righteously rehearsing in my mind in the context of these people who found themselves in a hard place, before extending a welcome.

I thought about a story I had once read about a father who had a son, and about how this son had blown a vast sum of money on partying. . . . I shuddered.

And then I prayed. For forgiveness, yes. Certainly for forgiveness. But also in simple gratitude that there is such a thing as grace this world. And that this grace drags us—sometimes with deep gladness, sometimes, alas, kicking and screaming—along for the ride.

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