

The judge

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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Like most churches, we occasionally receive requests for money from people in our community. I suspect I am not alone when I say that I have come to dread these calls. It's not that I don't think that the church should help people in need, or that I resent the "intrusion" on my time or anything like that. I am simply growing increasingly uncomfortable with my role as the judge of the "worthiness" or "legitimacy" of this or that request for assistance.

It's not that I don't understand the need for discernment. Our church, like many others, has been taken for a ride. Our church, like many others, has dealt with a number of, shall we say "creative" requests for money that were rather transparent exercises in deception and manipulation. Everyone has heard stories like this. Nobody wants funds to be directed in unhelpful directions when there are better places they could go. Everyone wants to be "good stewards" of what God has given us. And so, we institute policies and checks and balances and forms to fill out and questions to ask and assurances to request, etc, etc to protect ourselves from being taken advantage of.

I get all of this. I really do. But the *experience* of making those decisions, of deciding who is "worthy" and who is not, is unsettling to put it mildly. Just this week, I found myself on the other end of the phone, asking all kinds of questions that I couldn't imagine answering myself—questions ranging from describing the nature of their predicament to how they would use the funds to how their story could be verified to what their plans for the future looked like. It felt like an interrogation, and I felt guilty having to ask.

In this case, the judge decided to be "merciful" and to grant the request. All of the relevant factors were carefully weighed and measured and a "just" decision was rendered. How magnanimous of me. So why did it feel so empty, standing in front of the hotel room door, graciously offering my grocery card—this feeble token of piety or remorse or self-righteousness or all of the above? Why did it feel so hollow trying

to force awkward conversation with a person who I desperately wanted to relate to as an equal, but who probably only saw me as a vending machine even as I probably viewed them, however implicitly, as a vehicle for assuaging the guilt that comes with privilege.

One of the cities we visited while I was in Colombia a few weeks back was Sincelejo, where we spent an evening with a church comprised entirely of displaced people. We shared a wonderful meal together, heard the story of their church, sang songs, and prayed together. As we were getting ready to leave, one of the women went to the back and brought out some jewelry that she had made as part of their church's efforts to teach skills that could be used to support themselves and their families. Most knew only farming, and were having a tough time adjusting to city life. The church was doing what it could to address this by offering classes on gardening, jewelry making, art, crafts, etc.

What she showed us was a beautiful set of earrings with a matching necklace. I instantly thought, "my daughter would love that!" and asked her if they were for sale. She told me the price and I gave her a few dollars more than she asked. I left feeling very pleased with myself. For about 5 minutes. Then I felt the same kind of emptiness that I felt this past week at the hotel door. The same sense that an unbridgeable gap existed between my privilege and her need. The same queasy feeling that I—white, blessed, wealthy, compassionate, entitled, powerful—had rendered my verdict and my verdict was good. Her cause was worthy. Legitimate. She got her money—quite a generous amount, I not-so-humbly concluded—and I got my good feeling. Everyone wins.

Right?

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