

Does the Gospel Come With Strings Attached?

Even with the best of intentions, things have a way of going south. When we launched our outreach **ministry** at Mariners Church in Orange County, Calif., the first thing we thought to do was meet the basic needs of the people we were serving. Sounds reasonable, right? They need groceries; we'll give them a bag of food. They need winter coats? Got it. School supplies? Check. Then we'll teach them about Jesus, and they'll pray the prayer and *bam!* We're all good.

But wait. If we really believe in an irresistible Savior whose love is the most powerful force on Earth, why do we cling to manipulative tools and gimmicks to all but bribe someone into the kingdom of heaven?

Let's say you're handing out mosquito nets in an African village. The long line of people waiting is a clear sign they really need what you've brought. It's a captive audience. As you pass the nets across the folding table, do you say, "This is a free gift to you and all your neighbors from God-loving people who care about you"? Or do you start asking them about their relationship with Christ?

There's a subtlety here I don't want you to miss because I have missed it many times. If you're still holding on to the gift as you ask them about **Jesus**, there's a very good chance the two will be connected in their minds—and not in the way you may have intended. Just for a moment, they may think something such as, "Do I need to say yes to Jesus to get this net?"

If/Then Generosity

Most of the time, we're unaware that we're still hanging on to the gift, but sometimes we are. At these times, the way we

present the gospel can feel like a business transaction: “If you give me this or respond to what I’m asking, then Jesus will do this for you. He’ll save you from hell if you say these words. He’ll provide a meal for you if you raise your hand.”

Certainly there are people who recognize the business aspect and work the system to their advantage. But the people we minister to have taught us that receiving the gospel is more than just a simple transaction.

We often assume we need material resources to motivate people. But more often, despite the apparent material needs they have, the resources aren’t what they really want. More than anything, what they want and need is *relationship*.

Being Authentically Generous

This transactional method—offering people a reward for the right behavior or response—is very effective at motivating people. Intentionally or not, we manipulate people using the power of stuff. But when we achieve success this way, though our numbers may look great, the success we achieve isn’t consistent with the heart of the gospel message.

Transactional ministry is often done with good motives, but I wonder if deep down we embrace it because we like the immediate, visible results and how they make us feel. The people we are serving need what we offer them, even if they have to jump through a hoop to get it. Yet true **spiritual fruit** isn’t always produced immediately. And when we minister in this way, we focus on the short-term results and lack faith in God’s work over the long haul.

So is there a way for us to be authentically **generous** with people without trying to get something in return? Yes. It’s generosity that overflows from a heart that is satisfied in God, a heart that’s willing and ready to sacrifice for others—not to get something in return but as the natural fruit

of God's love for us. And this requires a deeper commitment to knowing and loving people.

Our conversations about Jesus shouldn't be the only ones we have with the people we serve. We have to earn the right to be heard and to share the **gospel** with people. And we do this to sacrificially love and serve them—not because we have to but because we want to. When it comes to the work of Jesus, we need to show up with a loving heart and open arms, letting the Holy Spirit do the work of bringing people closer to God.

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