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A Question of Being “Blessed”

My old friend from college tells me he is “blessed” because he made a fortune. I’ll admit to being a bit envious, but the big problem isn’t his money: It’s that he really believes God has rewarded him and his “blessing” has made him self-righteous, greedy, and out of touch. What do you think about being blessed?

Paul Sutherland: Such thorny issues. I sit here in Kampala, Uganda, where the GDP per person is \$576 per year. At the turn of the year, the local (government-influenced) newspaper asked Kampala children, “What are your hopes and dreams for 2016?” The overwhelming majority of those featured offered a consistent response: “I would like to be healthy!” American kids, I wager, would say a new iPad, making the team, getting good grades, or having friends. But here in Uganda and many other places in the world, all of those things are too far beyond the “dream” of good health, a balanced meal, and a restful night of sleep.

It is hard for me to see the rich/poor contrast along with the suffering and pain of everyday life here without having my “justice” gene say, This is not fair! But I was taught that I should ask myself, What can I do about it? and then act. Every person who can take a sweet, or even polluted, breath and feel the warm or cold breeze on his face can find happiness in that moment. We are all blessed to have the power to decide how we think, believe, and feel about our everyday world. We also have control over our actions and speech. We are in control over how we respond to events and our lot in life. Realizing this is very uncomfortable because it means we are responsible for ourselves: how we act, how we think, how *we are*.

Yesterday a man I had met on the street here a month ago saw me again and came running up, smiling, and said, “Oh Paul, how fortunate to see you again. I did make it to the village to see my 70-year-old dying mother.” I had given him the bus fare to go, after grilling him to make sure he was not scamming me with his story, because I was impressed with his desire to get back to his village to get more education. Now, as he spoke with perfect English, I realized I had been scammed. He even pulled out a Bible to make some point about something and looked me in the eyes and said, “I have not eaten all day. I have wandered through Kampala, and such luck to find you!”

I asked, “What have you done in your wandering? Did you look for a job?”

“No,” he answered, “I don’t have skills for a job.”

“You couldn’t be a waiter?” I asked, pointing to the servers in the café where I was seated. Gesturing to the cleaning people, guards, and cashiers surrounding us, I said, “You certainly couldn’t do what they do!” I was frustrated. “If I give you money, it is no different from if I were to give alcohol to an alcoholic. You are scamming people. What does it say in the Bible

about truthfulness?”

He had no response. Then I asked him if, as he was wandering the streets of Kampala, he saw any suffering.

He replied, “Yes, lots of it.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing,” he replied, “I have nothing to give.”

I asked if he could smile, or give a kind word, or help a old person carry her load.

He sat back in his chair, squeezed his Bible, and tears came to his eyes.

I told him I needed to get back to my family and stood up to leave. I put our 35-pound two-year-old in our baby carrier on my back and started the long, uphill walk

To ask Paul a question, email him directly at paul@spiritualityhealth.com.

home. It was hot, humid, equatorial summer weather and as I walked I felt really bad. I believe the young man needed to hear what I said, but I still felt I had been harsh. Then, a *boda-boda* (motorcycle taxi) came up behind me and stopped and the driver said, “Want a ride?” I shook my head no and trudged on. He watched me for a while from the side of the road and then followed, stopped again around 10 feet in front of me. He smiled and looked at my heavy load, now sleeping, and the groceries I was carrying. “Free! *Really* free. I will drive you for free,” he said, pointing up the long hill toward home. I said thank you and waved him on. But by the *boda-boda* driver’s sincere kindness to me, I felt “free” of the guilt for my stern words to the Bible-thumping scammer.

If your old friend who made

his fortune were to witness this afternoon play out, I wonder who he would relate to? More important, whom do you relate to? Do you relate to the scammer who feels envy and desires what others have, or are you the *boda-boda* driver trying to help a sweaty man get home with the groceries and his baby on a hot afternoon? So I will ask you another question: What would *you* do if you had your friend’s fortune? If you’re doing nothing with the fortune of skills, time, and resources you have now, don’t dream about how generous you would be if you had a larger fortune. Having money does not make a person generous—actions do. And having money does not make a person greedy—actions do.

Your friend is obviously behaving in a way that bothers you. Should you focus on his blessings, or your own? **S&H**

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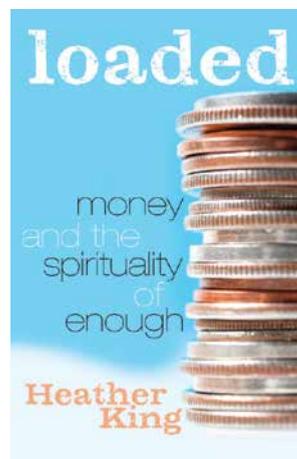


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