



## In Search of the Right Error

### Avoiding the Wrong Side of Compassion

by Phil Tuttle

A few years ago, I actually decided that I was too compassionate. I came to that conclusion when I was pastoring a little country church in a town of 850 in Illinois. Whenever someone down on his luck would come to the town and need help, about 80 percent of the time they would end up at our house or at our church.

A couple of times the three elders in our church had a pretty good talk with me about how trusting I was. One particular case precipitated this, though it wasn't an isolated event by any means. A family called and said, "We're moving into your area—we've already rented a house a couple of towns over. We love your church, and we want to come get involved there. Anyway, our transmission broke and we're stuck in Michigan, but we're on our way. And . . . I know you don't know us, but just brother-to-brother, can you help?"

I put \$600 on my personal credit card, and I wired it all. And we never saw this family.

"That was a nice thing to do," the elders told me, "and we appreciate your heart. But come on, Phil. God gave you a brain too." So I tried to be a little more discerning from then on.

One day while I was at work, I got a call from my wife, Ellen. "Hey, somebody just came by the house, and I'm not very comfortable," she told me. "You need to come home." I got home as quickly as I could and found a shabby guy dressed in a T-shirt covered with grime.

"Can you help me out with a bus fare?" he asked. He said he was headed to Arizona.

“Well, the bus doesn’t even come through here,” I told him.

“I know. I just got released from prison up by Chicago, and you know, they would have given me bus fare, and I thought I could live up there but it’s too many of my old friends, and I gotta get out of there . . .”

“Sooo, how much are we talking about?” I asked.

“I don’t want a handout,” he said. “I want to work for it.”

*Yeah, sure you do*, I thought. This was just the kind of scam the elders had warned me about. “I’ll tell you what,” I said. “Here’s the mower. My wife and I have to run a couple of errands. We’ll be back in an hour and a half, and if you’re here and the yard’s done, we’ll take you with us down to Champaign-Urbana and you can catch a bus there.”

He agreed, but added that he had surgery for a collapsed lung right before he was released from prison. *Yeah, like you’re wanting to mow my yard*, I thought as Ellen and I got in the car, locked the doors, and drove off. *We’ll never see you again.*

*We got back in a couple of hours, and the yard looked perfect. Not only had he mowed it, but he was on his hands and knees clipping along the tulips where no one had ever clipped. Then I got a glimpse of his shirt. The entire left side, both front and back, was absolutely soaked in blood.*

“Oh, my!” I said. “You’re bleeding!”

“Yeah, I think I just . . . remember I told you about my surgery? I think maybe I busted a few stitches or something. It’s fine. I don’t want to get your car dirty, though, sir.”

*I was shocked. We took him inside and let him shower and then got him some medical care, where they sewed his stitches back up. We gave him some fresh clothes, took him to the bus station, and paid for his fare to Phoenix.*

*Lord, I said silently, You handle the judgment part. I want to use my brain and be a good steward, but I will never again ignore the prompting of compassion. If I err, I want to err on the side of grace and mercy.*

*When God is prompting you with compassion, be compassionate. Yes, you might get taken advantage of, but God can compensate for that. We're called to be merciful, just as He has been merciful to us.*