



## 6. Accepting Inappropriate Gifts

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*The following vignette is an excerpt from an upcoming book by Dr. Craig. It is designed to give pastors, professional therapists, and pastoral caregivers options for dealing with ethical challenges. It is copyrighted and may not be duplicated, edited, or transmitted in any form without the written permission of the author. If you would like to duplicate or transmit any of this material, contact James D. Craig at [jcraig@northernlightcc.com](mailto:jcraig@northernlightcc.com).*

### Case Study

Lucy, a wealthy older member, came to discuss her husband's physically abusive behavior and serial unfaithfulness. Grudgingly, she accepted an appointment with Dan, though she really wanted to talk to Pastor Rich. When she found the lay counselor was a retired math teacher, she was encouraged. She, too, had spent nearly thirty years as a public school math and science teacher. She asked how he got into counseling, and Dan shared his personal story. Lucy said, "I wanted to talk to the Senior Pastor, but I think you will do just fine! Do I need to call for another appointment?"

Dan quickly said "I can make one for you now, if you like." He turned to his office computer, an obsolete desktop with a mismatched monitor and a broken keyboard donated by the board chairman, and began slowly scrolling through the schedule. "Would 7:00 PM Tuesday be OK?" He heard her scribble something on a pad of paper—writing down the appointment time, he thought. She said, "That sounds fine. I'll see you then."

When Lucy had gone, Dan noticed a small piece of paper on the chair in which she had been sitting. It was a check made out to him personally for \$2,000. In the memo blank, Lucy had graciously written "Thank you for your help. I didn't know where to turn, and you gave me hope."

Dan thought about running after her to return the check. But then he began to think about all the noble things he could do with the money. Two thousand dollars would reimburse the cost of his online biblical counseling degree, and it would go also provide some great books for the lending library he had envisioned.

As he opened his billfold and began to stuff the check in, he felt cold and uncomfortable. What if someone found out about the money and accused him of taking advantage of a vulnerable lady? And what would Lucy's abusive husband do when he discovered this large, unauthorized expenditure?

From their conversation, Dan knew Lucy would probably leave her husband. Freed from the man's cruel oversight, she might well become a key financial contributor to the lay counseling ministry. Dan decided he could not risk offending her by giving the money back. Instead, he decided to buy a new laptop computer for use in the counseling office. When he saw Lucy again, he would thank her for her donation and point out that it was being used completely for God's work.



## **The Problem**

Counselors are occasionally faced with the dilemma of whether or not to accept gifts. Pastors and church-centered caregivers ordinarily do not charge fees, so it is even more likely their counselees will want to give gifts or make special donations to show their appreciation for the extra time and attention.

A few years ago, I counseled with a pastor who had helped an older couple deal with the loss of their daughter. On the first anniversary of their daughter's death, the couple asked the pastor to come to their home and take his pick of their antiques. He gladly accepted their invitation, helping himself to a lovely drop leaf table, matching chairs, and a solid oak pie safe. He told me "They have more money than they can spend. They're old. Why should I insult them by turning down their generosity?"

I also know a volunteer pastoral caregiver who accepted a \$3,000 gift from a lady he counseled concerning her husband's infidelity. When confronted about the ethics of this decision, he countered, "She wanted to give my family a trip to Orlando to make up for the extra time I spent helping her. What's wrong with that?"

The answer is at least two-fold. First, counselees are vulnerable people. They grapple with guilt, shame, and embarrassment. They need affirmation, and are therefore easily manipulated by those who offer it in exchange for gifts. Unscrupulous counselors can drop hints like "I really love your collection of antique furniture—especially that gorgeous pie safe. But I know I'll never be able to afford such a thing on a pastor's salary" or "We were going to vacation in Orlando, but we probably can't afford it. The kids will be so disappointed." Counselees get the message. It's not rocket science.

Second, counselees can be deceitful, using money and gifts to manipulate counselors to do their bidding. Their donations come with strings attached. Hoping to secure a favorable ruling, they scratch a big check to the building fund, donate a valuable piece of property, or (in one case I knew) give the pastor a new car. In exchange, they expect the pastor to OK their divorces, tacitly approve of their extramarital affairs, or side with them against other church and family members.

## **The Solution**

Happily, Dan's hesitation proved his conscience was working. He should have followed his conscience, contacted Lucy and returned the check. He could have said:

*Lucy, I appreciate your generosity, but I cannot accept this. My work here is voluntary. If you want to make a donation to the church, you can send a check to the church office or drop it in the offering plate Sunday.*

Dan and Lucy could spend the next session talking about her thoughts surrounding the gift. She might express thanks for the counselor's time and insights. She also might confess that she had given the gift to provoke her husband, or to somehow atone for the time she had spent with the



counselor. In either case, Dan would be wise to forgo the gift in exchange for a clear, ethical relationship that protects his credibility and her domestic safety.

### **Pastoral Teaching Tip: Godliness With Self-Sufficiency**

Want to experience an unhealthy *dependence* in less than sixty seconds? Grab a willing partner, lock on with a big bear hug, and don't let go. The first ten seconds will feel warm and wonderful. The second ten seconds will begin to feel hot and confining. By the end of thirty seconds, your arms will be aching and your friend will be begging you to let go. Squeeze tight for another twenty seconds, and your arms will almost pop from their sockets as your partner screams, kicks, and pushes you away.

*There is great gain in godliness with contentment.* These are lovely, oft quoted words from I Timothy 6:6. Asked what they mean, most believers will answer with something like "You will have a good life if you are faithful to God and happy with what you have."

Though this answer is partially true and is supported in other Bible passages, Paul is saying something more here. Writing to Timothy, a young minister he recruited and trained, the Apostle is recommending two lifestyle attitudes that bring rich, enduring rewards.

The first is *godliness*. Paul wanted the young man to be a good, reliable, honest, courageous man who cared more about what God thought than what other people thought.

The second is *self-sufficiency*. This is the literal meaning of the word often translated "contentment". Though Paul had every right to demand payment from the churches with which he worked, he was always willing to support himself financially and emotionally. This silenced critics who claimed he was in it for the money or power. It also freed Paul to say what really needed to be said without fear of losing his job. Though his letters reflect a strong desire for fellowship and gratitude, they reveal an even stronger ability and willingness to go it alone when necessary.

Paul knew *a dependent pastor is a bitter, ineffective pastor*. Conversely, he knew that a pastor who could earn his own living was *free to be friendly as well as effective*. Being independent in the biblical sense does not mean being isolated, self-righteous, or hostile. It means being free to think and act in a godly way, with a clear conscience and the promise of a better tomorrow.