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Dear Church Family,

*We've all been there, haven't we? You're stuck at a red light. A homeless man shuffles his way down the row of cars before you. He's holding a beat-up cardboard sign that reads, "Hungry. Please Help. God Bless." His clothes are dirty, worn, and torn. His eyes are sunken and tinged with shame. As he steps closer, your eyes anxiously dance between him and the light. "Come on green," you whisper under your breath. But the light doesn't turn and now you have a decision to make. *What do you do?* Some feign ignorance: their eyes lock straight ahead or suddenly they become engrossed by something on their phone. Others are kind enough to acknowledge the desperate stranger with a sympathetic smile and nod through a closed window, behind a locked door. Some finger through their wallet for a few loose bills or dredge up a handful of coins mixed with paperclips and gum wrappers from the depths of the center console to deposit in the man's coffer. *But aren't these choices less than satisfying? What's the God-honoring thing to do in this difficult situation?**

While there are good reasons to withhold giving money to a stranger, James identified charity as living proof of saving faith: "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that" (James 2:15-16)? "Ah yes!" you might say, "but James was speaking of 'brothers' and 'sisters' within the church, not the stranger on the street!" Perhaps. But what about Jesus who instructed His disciples saying, "Give to everyone who begs from you" (Luke 6:30), or Solomon who said, "Whoever despises his neighbor is a sinner, but blessed is he who is generous to the poor" (Proverbs 14: 21), or Paul who was eager to "remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10), or to the writer of the Hebrews who said, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (Hebrews 13:2)? Have you forgotten the way in which benevolence was woven by heaven's needle into the very fabric of the Israelite economy? Vineyards and grain fields weren't to be stripped bare because the leftovers were reserved, "for the poor and for the sojourner" (Leviticus 19:10, 23:22).

While compassion and charity are central tenets of Christian ethics, some go too far. The Social Gospel of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conceived in liberal protestant churches, is alive and well to this day. Adherents hold that the greatest problem facing man is not a sin-stained soul and enmity with a Holy God, but rather, impoverishment, inequality, and injustice. They insist that man's *greatest* need is higher wages, a roof overhead, a stocked pantry, an education, and healthcare, not the cleansing blood of Jesus. But friends, caring for the temporal needs of the body while neglecting the eternal needs of the soul is not true but tragically false religion!

Sadly, some believers bear the spiritual scars inflicted by the lash of liberalism, and have learned to correlate Christian charity with false teaching. Thus, they have a tendency to view philanthropic initiatives of the church under a raised brow of suspicion. Oh, how the devil delights in our over-corrections!

*What does it look like for First Presbyterian Church to remain faithful to the Great Commission with a Christlike commitment to loving and serving our neighbors in need?* The Lord has blessed this church with wonderful deacons to show us the way! If you watch carefully during Wednesday night suppers or Sunday services, you'll see that our deacons warmly pursue the "sojourner in our midst." They take the first step, oftentimes, across social and cultural thresholds, to serve, see and to listen to those who are so often unserved, unseen and unheard. They recognize the image of God in those who might not even recognize it in themselves! We ought to follow their lead!

Unto that end, Todd Robinson, Heather Satcher and the FPC Youth are spearheading a new and exciting initiative to provide benevolence bags to every household in the congregation so that YOU too can take the initiative and love your needy neighbor "not in word or talk but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18). Each bag contains essential toiletries like deodorant, hand sanitizer, a toothbrush and toothpaste, a bar of soap, band-aids, and wet wipes, along with socks, a bottle of water, food, and a Gospel tract.

*Won't you please grab a bag, lovingly prepared by our youth, and keep it in your car?* Next time you're stuck at a red light, you won't have to dread the man with the sign and the sad eyes. Instead, you can ask him his name and give him something that God might use to bless his day, change his life and maybe even save his soul! Ask the recipient of your bag if you can pray for them. Invite them to church! Remember their name and share it with us at church so we can be praying for them too. Once you've given one bag away, grab another and get back out there!

Each bag contains an invitation to FPC because toiletries get used up, water bottles run dry, and food gets eaten, but a relationship with Jesus in the context of a church family has everlasting significance. And that's what we're after: the salvation of lost souls! So, if/when the Lord is pleased to bring one of these blessed recipients of a benevolence bag through the doors of our church, it is my prayer and confidence that they will be received like the prodigal son: "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him (Luke 15:20)." God grant that our needy neighbors would receive a similar welcome at FPC as they are enveloped in a sea of open arms, smiling faces, and radiant love because those who have been forgiven much, love much.

Your grateful servant,



Jim McCarthy  
Senior Minister