

INTRO

You’ve probably encountered someone begging in your lifetime, especially if you’ve spent time in a major urban area. As people of faith, we have scripture and a Savior that have lots to say about tending to those who are poor, and even specifically about giving to them (e.g., Matthew 19:21, chapter 25, Luke 14:13, 19:8). If Jesus were using contemporary English, he may have called for provisions for “panhandlers” (a term for beggars used throughout this Brewed Theology). But such encounters aren’t especially comfortable. During a 2026 interview*, former President Barack Obama urged lawmakers to adopt a new approach to addressing homelessness, saying Americans don’t want to “navigate around a tent city” in major urban areas.

While living unhoused and panhandling on the streets are distinct situations, (though sometimes related,) the discomfort they evoke in us who are housed and well-fed is palpable. Obama was saying the uncomfortable thing out loud, and calling for strategic action.

BEGGARS & PANHANDLERS: What to (not) do?

a Brewed Theology
conversation starter*

But what should the call to action look like for us? In this BT lesson, we consider various responses to panhandlers and beggars. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for every situation, but there are certainly “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal.2.20, NRSVue) responses that, in their own way, recognize the God-given preciousness and dignity of every person.

*Obama, Barack. “My Conversation with Brian Tyler Cohen.” *Medium*, 14 Feb. 2026, <https://barackobama.medium.com/my-conversation-with-brian-tyler-cohen-e25cac125f44>

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Do you remember the first time you encountered someone begging, or panhandling? What was your reaction, or that of those around you? When was the most recent time? Was your reaction different? Where does discomfort come from, when seeing or meeting people asking for help? What does your faith tell you? What stories or teachings from Jesus offer insight into giving to the poor, the importance of community, and or systems that push people into difficult situations? How do you weigh Jesus’ words with your actions, or public policy? Why are people uncomfortable around panhandlers?

BIBLE BASICS

- **Deuteronomy 15:11** – Some laws concerning treatment of neighbors, and especially those in need.
- **Matthew 25:31-46** – Jesus talks judgment. The nations are judged by treatment of the “least.”
- **Acts 3:1-10** – Disciples Peter and John see a panhandler, and offer him Jesus. Thoughts?
- **Hebrews 13:2** – Consider how you may be entertaining angels by showing hospitality to strangers.

ESSENTIAL READINGS and LISTENINGS

“GIVE TO STREET PEOPLE” (read or 24-minute listen)

Three Christian thinkers weigh in on whether Christians should always give money to people on the street who ask for it. Thoughts are by Gary Hoag, “The Generosity Monk,” Andy Bales, chief executive of the Union Rescue Mission, and Ron Sider, president of Evangelicals for Social Action. *(Tip: the differing opinions in this article lay the groundwork for three parts of the Crafted Conversation.)*

“RECENT GRAD MAKES HEADLINES WITH PANHANDLING EXPERIMENT”

This short article highlights George Fox University (Newberg, OR) graduate David Spears, who double-majored in economics and political science and now works for the US Bureau of Labor Statistics in the Portland, OR, office. Spears spent 12 days as a panhandler the summer before his senior year. His statistical analysis is interesting, if not eye-opening.

“BEGGARS WILL CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK”

Watch this Tedx Talk, or read the transcript. This talk by Ståle Wig, social anthropologist at the University of Oslo. Wig doesn’t answer how to respond to panhandlers, but does get to the heart of why we feel so uncomfortable around them. He also discusses how beggars and NGOs operate in similar systems.

NOTE: Wig’s speaking cadence is deliberate and highly intelligible. You can save time by speeding up YouTube’s video playback rate (hit the gear icon in the video player), or, if you prefer, use this link to [read a manuscript of Wig’s presentation](#).

EXTRA CREDIT for the OVER-ACHIEVERS

There is no shortage of online articles and videos about present-day panhandling and begging. We suggest you Google it yourself and read and listen to your heart’s content. We think you’ll notice a pattern in others’ observations and responses that fits into one of the three basic categories (personal, local, institutional) described in the first article in the homework we provided above. If you find something novel, please let us know at brewedtheology@gmail.com. Thank you!

SOURCES

Bales, Andy, Hoag, Gary & Sider, Ron. “Give to Street People?” Christianity Today, 13 January 2011, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2011/01/should-christians-give-money-to-street-people/> Accessed 23 February 2026.

“Recent Grad Makes Headlines with Panhandling Experiment” George Fox Journal, Spring 2014, <https://www.georgefox.edu/journalonline/spring14/alumni/panhandling.html> Accessed 23 February 2026.

Wig, Ståle. “Beggars Change the Way You Think.” YouTube, uploaded by TEDxTalks, June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4wE-kp_dBk

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