A friend told me a story about a service club that had built a well for an African village so the women in the village would not have to continue their daily ritual of walking two hours to the nearest fresh water. Filled with righteous anger, my friend exclaimed, “How dare they do that? They took their jobs away! What are those women going to do now? Read a book? I bet those do-gooders are patting themselves on their backs for helping those ‘poor women’! If you no longer had a job, would you feel good or needed?” She then ranted about another church group that had built a well that overflowed, creating a swamp and reintroducing malaria to the region.

So here’s the question: It’s a holiday season and charities are begging for our dollars. So many needs — dirty water, starving kids, slavery, homelessness, sadness, suffering, child abuse, churches without stained-glass windows. The list goes on and on. How can we give better?

About 800 years ago the acclaimed physician and rabbi Moses Maimonides spelled out what seems to me a pretty good answer in the form of a hierarchy of charitable expression. As a doctor, first on his list was that giving should “Do no harm.” Much like former UCLA basketball coach John Wooden, Maimonides suggested that we may “harm someone if we do anything for him that he could do for himself.”

Maimonides went on to explain, “There is no greater gift than to endow him with a gift of a loan, or enter into partnership or find employment for him in order to strengthen his hand until he need no longer be dependent on others.” He also mentioned giving anonymously and noted, “the greatest sages would walk about in secret and put coins in the doors of the poor.” Such a gift is a surprise boost, a single opportunity that creates no sense of entitlement or dependency.

Following in the same line of thinking, I asked myself three and a half questions:

1. How am I enabling someone? Giving a homeless person a bed has its place, but perhaps consider helping in a way that enables that person to make herself her own bed and home.

2. Am I really helping someone to be happier and self-reliant? For example, food aid to many developing countries can destroy local food production by undercutting the local market and taking away incentives to build a resilient and self-sufficient food program. Ironically, food aid can keep a lower socioeconomic class subservient and unhopeful, just as it keeps relief workers in business with feel-good jobs. As a friend from Africa told me, the despots love such aid because the cycle of dependency never ends.

3. Am I seeing the “whole person”? We are mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual beings. We all need love and friendship and respect. I met a woman years ago who was a trained therapist and a thoughtful and loving human being. When asked for a handout for food, she would invite the person to dine with her at a modest restaurant or just sit quietly and share take-out or fast food with him.

3½. Be mindful about potentially harmful giving, but remember the Buddhist saying, “Suffering...
exists so we have something to do [about it].” If someone is starving, help him; if someone needs a seat on the bus, give it to her and stand; if you have time and someone is rushed, give him your place in line. As a minister once told me, “Anything worth doing is worth doing poorly.”

Back to my friend’s story of digging wells. In my own experience, when potable water was brought to an Asian village, the village proceeded to build a bigger school to accommodate the influx of girls who now had enough free time available to attend. So above all, we must do something — even badly — and not look at the complexity of giving as an excuse to sit back.

Paul Sutherland is president of Financial & Investment Management Group. See excerpts from his best-selling book Zenvesting, as well as his latest book, The Virtue of Wealth, at SpiritualityHealthbooks.com. To ask a question or chat, contact him at paul@SpiritualityHealth.com.

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