

The Moral Dilemma of Compartmentalization

We are not normally disturbed by the misfortunes of others unless we actually make physical contact with them. While leaving choir rehearsal one night, I walked past a man who was sitting in the doorway of the church in much distress. He was a mess and would not make eye contact with anyone as we walked past him on our way out. A minute or two after I drove away, my conscience got the best of me and I circled back and eventually found him outside on the other side of the church crying uncontrollably. He said his wife just kicked him out for the last time and he had walked about 15 miles from there to where he now was. He was filthy and unkempt and apparently all of his worldly possessions fit in a very small knapsack. Both he and his wife, who were on public assistance, were addicted to drugs, fought all the time, and he was prone to violence. To make matters worse, she has a small child. I couldn't persuade him to let me take him back home or anywhere for help. Eventually he walked away and didn't want me to follow. I did anyway, gave him some money, and left him there in the freezing cold. I felt so helpless.

Of course, I was emotionally devastated by this. At the same time, I was reminded that the world is full of such people, and almost 100% of the time, I do not actually care at all, and feel no strong emotions about the plight of the homeless, as I did this evening. It reminds me of the Gaither chorus, singing and praising the Lord, with huge smiles on their faces, and at the same time believing that most of the rest of the world is going to suffer eternal torment in Hell. We do tend to compartmentalize our lives and our feelings, and tend to concern ourselves only with those people with whom we come into close physical proximity.

I'm not saying this is right or wrong. It only illustrates why people are able to believe in eternal torment in Hell for most of humanity, without being bothered by it.

Just so you know, the way I decided to handle my moral dilemma with respect to what happened last night was to become a regular contributor to the Jesus Center, in a town nearby, whose mission it is to minister to people like the one I was personally unable to help that night.