

A Town's Lost Opportunity

Years ago at a resort area along the East Coast, a small community was having an open town meeting about some financial problems.

Among the two dozen or so people in the audience was one man no one seemed to know. He was apparently visiting in that area and had just dropped in on the meeting.

He started to make a comment once as various projects were considered, but he was interrupted. So for the rest of the time, he kept still, and he left early.

Just as he went out, someone arriving late came in and said breathlessly, "What was he doing here? Is he going to help us?"

The others said, "What are you talking about? Who was that man?"

The person who just arrived responded, "You mean you don't know? That was John D. Rockefeller. His yacht is in our harbor. Didn't you get his help?"

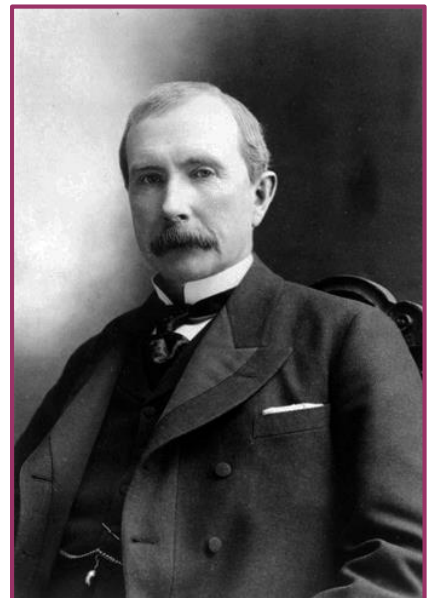
In despair, someone said, "No. We didn't get his help. We didn't know who he was."

Rockefeller was a person who could have assisted the town, and most likely would have, for a couple of reasons: (1) his fortune, and (2) his habit and record of philanthropy.

Rockefeller (1839 – 1937) was a co-founder of the Standard Oil Company, which dominated the oil industry and was the first great U.S. business trust. He revolutionized the petroleum industry, and along with other key contemporary industrialists such as Andrew Carnegie, defined the structure of modern philanthropy.

As kerosene and gasoline grew in importance, Rockefeller's wealth soared and he became the world's richest man and the first American worth more than a billion dollars, controlling 90 percent of all oil in the United States at his peak. Adjusting for inflation, his fortune upon his death in 1937 stood at \$336 billion, making him the richest person in U.S. history.

His charitable giving – his desire to help others – was grounded in his faith. He was a member of the Erie Street Baptist Mission Church, where he taught Sunday school and served as a trustee, clerk and occasional janitor. Religion was a guiding force in his life, and Rockefeller believed it to be the source of his success.



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He attended church every Sunday, and when traveling he would often attend services at African-American Baptist congregations, leaving a substantial donation. He was the founder of the University of Chicago and Rockefeller University and funded the establishment of the Central Philippine University in the Philippines. He also provided funding for a college in Atlanta for African-American women, which became Spelman College, as well as considerable donations to other colleges and universities.

In all probability, that little town on the East Coast would have benefited from Rockefeller's generosity. He could have been in the meeting by divine appointment to aid the townspeople.

What do we take away from what happened in that community that evening long ago? A couple of things:

1. **Don't miss the opportunity to meet and to know people who cross our paths.** We can't always understand why – perhaps a providential reason – folks are sent our way.
2. **Be open to ideas that are offered.** Rockefeller's attempt to speak in the town meeting was shut off. We should always value the expression of others' opinions.

Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it (Hebrews 13:2 NIV).

– Beecher Hunter