

House md Season 8 Episode 3

Charity Case

This episode looks at issues of greed and selfishness in relation to generosity and altruism and the motives for behaving generously or selfishly

Synopsis

Benjamin, a multi-millionaire, is shown around the Phoenix Foundation, a charity helping people find work, posing as a potential customer. He asks about how they help people with addiction, but discovers that they don't have the resources to help with childcare. As the person who is showing him round takes a phone call, Benjamin leaves. Then she notices an envelope on the floor which contains a cheque for \$1 million. She runs after him but he collapses in the street. This is how he becomes Dr House's patient.

We first see House cutting his hair in a bathroom at the hospital. When asked why he doesn't do it at home, he says that at home there wouldn't be someone else to clean it up. So we see House acting in a typically selfish way right from the start.

Dr Park thinks Benjamin is just dehydrated and therefore doesn't need House's ministrations, but House points out that Benjamin is extremely rich and therefore in a position to be grateful. Since House no longer has any money to spend on his department, is being paid a minimum and wants his team back, he is on the lookout for funds: 'test his wallet'.

In order to create a 'free' team, he has invited Dr Adams who lost her job at the prison to come and help him. She thought she was coming for coffee and a chat, but he says 'a do-gooder like you' would not say no to helping out. She suggests that she could show altruism by working at a free clinic, but House argues he can be today's free clinic.

House is interested in Benjamin's extreme generosity and why he feels he needs to give so much away. Benjamin explains that he used to spend \$6000 on a landscaper just to change the plants in his garden. Now he lives on \$25,000 pa and gives everything else, money and possessions, away. Dr Adams sees this as 'helping others'; Dr Park just thinks he's 'sick'.

Dr Park also suggests that it's good for people to have nothing and not be given hand-outs or help because it makes you work harder. Her parents were immigrants who had to work for everything they have.

Dr Foreman suspects that House's own motivation for treating Benjamin is selfish: he wants to con him into funding his old team. Drs Chase and Taub are ready to come back but 13 (Dr Hadley) won't return his calls. Dr Park says she regards Benjamin's extreme altruism as a symptom of illness. Foreman points out that this raises a conundrum: if Benjamin is sick and his altruism is a result of his illness, it would be unethical to take his money because it would mean he was being exploited and not able to make a proper choice. House says cynically that he intends to check the net worth of all new patients.

Downstairs House finds 13 waiting. She asks him to stop pestering her about coming back. Because she does not have much time left before her Huntingdon's disease kills her, she says that she wants to be happy with her girlfriend and just enjoy what time she has left. She is about to go to Greece and is not working as a doctor any more.

Dr Adams and Dr Park talk to Benjamin. Dr Adams says he scares her: she's thought about working for Doctors Without Borders but his choices are even more extreme. Dr Park says he just makes Adams feel guilty. Benjamin suddenly worsens. House talks to him about being financially grateful for being helped, and calls him a 'Father Teresa'. He says that 'a racing heart is a medical condition, but a bleeding heart is a stupid condition'.

Dr Adams brings Dr Park some coffee. Dr Park offers to pay her for it but Dr Adams doesn't want it. This leads to awkwardness between them.

House talks to Benjamin and sells him a sob story about his own situation. Benjamin offers to help to the tune of \$1 million dollars to fund Diagnostics. House points out that he is an opportunistic ex-con, but Benjamin isn't bothered.

House discusses the case with Wilson. Wilson is clear where the ethics lie – you can't have sex with a sexaholic, even if it makes you both happy; you can't give alcohol to an alcoholic; you can't take money from a sick man. It's ethically suspect. House points out that because in the US people have to pay for their medical care, just being a doctor means taking money from sick people. Wilson says it's not the same thing.

Meanwhile Wilson talks about his own problems, but House isn't listening.

Benjamin talks about his estranged family. His wife won't take his calls and she couldn't cope with him giving away all his money. But he says 'having a family doesn't exempt me from social responsibility'. The question is: should family come first? He says he provides for his children, but he doesn't see that he can buy them video games or send them to private schools while other children are starving.

Dr Park brings Dr Adams some coffee in return for the earlier coffee. Dr Adams says that she brought the coffee as a gift, but Dr Park wants to know why. House says that Dr Adams suffers from rich guilt, but Dr Park says she doesn't see why a person who doesn't want anything from strangers should be called crazy.

Later we see 13 phoning House to say she was wrong to push House away because he has been a friend and that she will help out. House cons her further by asking her to drive out of her way to buy Chinese food.

Meanwhile, Dr Adams ups the stakes in the generosity war with Dr Park by asking her to do her the 'favour' of taking a spare pair of shoes from her. The shoes were \$125 dollars, far beyond Dr Park's price range because her car needs fixing and she is short of money, but came as a deal of buy one get one free. Dr Adams insists that Dr Park doesn't need to pay for the shoes, just accept them.

Dr Wilson has changed his mind about accepting things from Benjamin, because now Benjamin wants to donate a kidney to one of Wilson's dying patients. House challenges him about saying that

it was 'an ethical no-brainer not to take from the sick'. Wilson says he changed his mind, but House says it doesn't make sense that Benjamin would want to give an organ to a stranger.

Dr Foreman talks to Benjamin himself. Benjamin says he researched the risks and is clear that he wants to give his kidney, so Foreman agrees. Benjamin also continues to say that he will give the money to House as well.

13 turns up to help and House again explains to Park that she is there because of guilt about leaving, though 13 again argues that she just wants to be happy.

Dr Adams has left a gift for Dr Park in House's office; this is in return for Dr Park fixing up a job interview for Dr Adams. So the niceness war continues to escalate. Dr Park says she doesn't like taking charity or owing people anything. House says she's either extremely arrogant or extremely insecure.

Benjamin gets as far as surgery. Wilson asks him again if he's sure, but Benjamin says the donation will make him happy. But he becomes unstable and the surgery cannot take place. Foreman accuses House of causing it by drugging Benjamin. House denies it but then tells the women that he did in fact do that.

House talks to Dr Adams about the gift-giving: does she do it to get Dr Park to like her or to mess her about? Dr Adams says that at first she found it interesting that Dr Park didn't feel she could accept a cup of coffee but now she just wants to win the generosity war. The gift certificate was for a spa. House says that if she wants to win then she must give her something she can't possibly reciprocate.

House sends 13 to test Benjamin. 13 pretends to be in need of a kidney too. Benjamin says he will give her his other kidney. 13 points out that without even one kidney he will have to go on dialysis and then he'll die. Benjamin says that's fine. When he's dead he can donate all his other organs and more people will live. 13 phones House and pronounces Benjamin as 'ker-azy'.

13 is having doubts about her decision. She was trained to be a doctor and to save lives which requires skills that many others do not have, so is it right for her now to decide she can please herself and put personal happiness before others' needs? She feels guilty for wanting to have fun.

Wilson's patient dies and while he is talking to House about this House realises what is actually physically wrong with Benjamin. Benjamin's altruism is caused by a thyroid problem which results in irrational generosity. Benjamin is sent for surgery to correct the problem.

House tests Benjamin's recovery by asking for the money. Benjamin says facing death makes you focus and he now realises that family matters more than anything. Wanting to get his family back and not giving the money does not 'make me a bad person'. House says that instead he is a 'healthy person'.

Dr Adams has upped the generosity stakes by paying for the repairs to Dr Park's car. Dr Park says 'you win' and 'thank you' but it turns out that this was a plan between Dr Park and Dr House to see how far they could push Dr Adams' need to be generous, Dr Park got her car fixed and Dr House says 'good work'.

But Dr House has a change of mind too. He sees 13 with her girlfriend and tells her 'you're fired'. He says he can't work with a person who just feels guilty and that she should go and be happy. 13 leaves.

Some excerpts to watch

When Benjamin talks about why he's chosen to give money away rather than keep his family

When Benjamin talks with Dr House after his surgery about why he's decided to put family first after all.

When Dr House is asking Dr Wilson about when it's right to take money.

Some questions to think about

What do you make of the 'generosity war' between Dr Adams and Dr Park and what do you think about the outcome?

What do you think about Dr House's motives and behaviour throughout the episode? Why do you think he finally fires 13?

Do you agree with the 'sick' Benjamin that social responsibility towards others comes before family or the 'healthy' Benjamin that family comes first?

What do you think about the question which is raised about 'unhealthy' generosity?

How do you feel about the minor characters who suffer, or could suffer: Benjamin's family; Wilson's patient who died; 13's girlfriend?

Some ideas from scripture if you want to compare them:

Matthew 6.1-4 Give gifts in secret

Mark 12.41-44 widow's mite

Luke 3.11 share what you don't need with others

