

DISCIPLINES OF FAITH: ALMSGIVING

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Luke 16:19-31

During this season of Lent, I have been preaching this sermon series called *Disciplines of Faith*. Each week, I have invited you to consider classic Christian spiritual disciplines. We began with Fasting, then Solitude, and last week we looked at Simplicity. Today, I want to examine the topic of Almsgiving. Now, if this term almsgiving sounds old-fashioned, well, it is. It is also out of fashion having been lost as a widespread Christian practice. Despite a rich history in the early church, few people talk about almsgiving anymore.

So, what is almsgiving? Almsgiving, by definition, is giving something such as money or food to the poor. We do it when we volunteer for Compassionate Hands, through our food drives, through Rise Against Hunger, through our support of the mission trip to Guatemala. Whenever we help those in need, we are engaging in almsgiving.

The word alms comes to us from the Greek word ἔλεος which means pity. As one writer puts it, "Almsgiving is intentional, tangible relief given to alleviate the suffering of the poor."

In scripture, almsgiving has its roots in Judaism, specifically the concern for the poor that we find in Deuteronomy where we read, *If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns... do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor* (Deuteronomy 15:7). It is a recurring theme in the Old Testament to hear the call for charitable actions to the needy and powerless. The prophet Amos rails against the oppression of the poor by the wealthy. Isaiah called for judgment against those *grinding the face of the poor* (Isaiah 3:15). The book of Proverbs links our response to poverty to our relationship with God saying, *Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him* (Proverbs 14:31).

In the New Testament, we find the story of the man who comes to Jesus asking how he might find eternal life. The man has followed God's commands faithfully since he was a youth. Jesus instructs the man to sell all of his possessions and give them to the poor. But the man cannot bring himself to do this. In Luke's gospel we read Jesus' words, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God*. In the book of Acts we read of the Gentile Cornelius who was *a devout man who feared God with all his household, who gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God* (Acts 10:2).

The passage that I selected for today is the parable told by Jesus of the rich man and Lazarus. The first part of the story is straightforward. It describes a rich man

who lived high on the hog. He wore expensive clothes and ate well every day. Conversely, outside his front door lay a poor man named Lazarus. Lazarus was covered in sores and he was starving. Lazarus' greatest hope was just to eat the food that had fallen off the table of the rich man in the nice house. Lazarus lacked the strength to move and the dogs would stop by and lick at his wounds. Lazarus was dog food.

Not surprisingly, Lazarus dies. He is then carried by the angels to be with Abraham, the father of his faith. He is in heaven. At some point after that, the rich man also dies. But instead of going to eternal bliss (as he probably expected), he is relegated to Hades, a place of eternal torment. From Hades, the man can see across the divide to where Lazarus is in the company of Abraham.

You are probably wondering what this story has to do with alms. There are certainly no alms here, but that is why I chose this passage. This story is the very antithesis of almsgiving. The rich man demonstrates absolutely no mercy, no care, no compassion, no consideration of any kind for the man suffering at his doorstep. Lazarus wasn't asking for handouts. His only hope was that some garbage might fall his way. But it doesn't. What is telling about the story is that the rich man knows Lazarus' name, and from torment in Hades, the man calls out, *Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.* The man can't claim to be ignorant of Lazarus lying at his door. He knew him. Yet, he purposely chose to ignore Lazarus' needs. Now, after failing to show compassion to Lazarus, the man asks Father Abraham for mercy—a request which Abraham denies.

It is clear from scripture that as people of faith we are called to give alms, to assist the poor. Giving can be looked at in different ways. Say, for example, you want to give ten million dollars to Cumberland University for them to name a building after you. That is wonderful. Do it. But that is not almsgiving. That is philanthropy. Philanthropy is generally viewed as giving towards the long-term welfare of others. The word philanthropy comes from the Greek words for 'love' and 'human being'—*philos* plus *anthropos*. Philanthropists give generously to such causes as hospitals, schools, museums, parks, helping agencies, and much, much more. Our world is better because of philanthropists. Philanthropists can be alms givers, but not normally.

Another form of giving with which you are familiar is tithing—giving to the church. Tithing supports the ministry of the church, which includes helping the poor. But it is still different than almsgiving. Almsgiving incorporates an intent to help the poor specifically. No amount of money is specified. The defining feature of almsgiving is the intent of the heart. As Jesus says, *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:21).

Sadly, most of us associate a moral component with poverty. We feel that the poor are poor because of some moral failing on their part, that they deserve their fate. If they were better people, they would not be in their situation. They would be like us.

But often, poverty is just poverty. We all make mistakes, but many of us have the cushion to protect us, to keep us on this side of the poverty line. But some people are trapped in a perpetual cycle of poverty from which it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape. I saw this first hand in Guatemala with entire villages trapped in poverty by a government and by corporations that exploited them for cheap labor. In our own country, too many are held down by inequalities in education, health care, housing, and employment. As followers of Christ, is not our job to judge people for being poor but to show compassion and understanding.

During this Lenten season, as we examine different spiritual disciplines, I want to point out how almsgiving is different than the other disciplines. Unlike fasting and solitude and simplicity and prayer (which we will look at next week), almsgiving has a component of judgment attached to it—judgment for us if we fail to exercise mercy to the poor. Not fasting is not a sin; ignoring the poor is. We see this in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man, who failed to give comfort to Lazarus, finds himself in Hades. In torment, he asks that Lazarus be sent to bring him comfort—just a drop of water. Of course, if the rich man had shown as much as a drop of mercy to Lazarus, then he would not be in his predicament. Abraham informs the man that judgment has been made. He had his chance on earth and now there is no crossing from one place to the other. His fate is sealed forever.

Other places in scripture are also clear on this. Failure to show compassion to the poor comes at a price. For example, in Isaiah, God addresses those who *turn aside the needy for justice* and who *rob the poor...* And to those people God poses this question: *What will you do on the day of punishment?* (Isaiah 10:2-3)

For us, as Christ-followers, giving alms is not an elective spiritual practice. It is an imperative. We are called to show mercy. In 1773, the influential American preacher Jonathan Edwards said this in a sermon, “Tis the most absolute and indispensable duty of a people of God to give bountifully and willingly for the supply of the wants of the needy.”¹

When we engage in almsgiving, we are to do so quietly and without fanfare. Almsgiving is not meant to draw attention to us. Jesus is very clear on this when he says, *Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So, whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the*

¹ Jonathan Edwards, “The Duty of Charity to the Poor” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*.

streets, so that they may be praised by others... But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you (Matthew 6:1-4).

And so, for this fourth week of Lent, I want to charge you with engaging in a practice of almsgiving. Giving to the church does not count. But this week, identify a need and give to it. Do so quietly. Make your giving an act of prayer. When we give alms we develop a connection not just with God but with those in need.

Finally, I would like to close with a story. This week, I was sitting at my desk in my office at the church reading a long, scholarly article on almsgiving when the phone rang. Kristy was on the other line talking to one of you and unable to answer, so I picked up. It was a young woman seeking assistance. I talked to her for a long time and the short version of her situation is that she is a single mother of two, she works in a local restaurant, she lives in a home owned by the Lebanon Housing Authority. She pays all of her bills. She has a car which she has paid off and she is proud of that. Recently, her health kept her from working, and because she wanted to keep her bills paid, she took out a title loan on her car for \$700. Now, she needs money to make a payment on the loan or she will lose her car. If she loses her car, she will lose her job, and her situation will spiral downward. Loans like this are predatory; they are evil.

So, after asking lots of questions assessing her situation, I agreed that the church would make the payment for her. She was happy. And we hung up. But I got to thinking. Making this payment was only temporary. We needed to do more. If you or I go to the bank tomorrow for a personal loan we will pay 6 to 10% in annual interest—the APR. The interest on a 30-year mortgage right now is about 5%. A car loan will run us about 4%. This woman's interest rate is 22%. But that is the monthly rate. The simple APR is 240%. The compounded APR is over 900%. We can make a single payment for her, but there is a strong chance that she will once again fall behind. The system is designed to trap people like her in debt. The woman has been paying for several months and the amount she owes is only \$20 less than the amount she borrowed. This only ends badly for the borrower. So, I called her back with a proposal. The church would buy the debt. We will pay the loan and she will make weekly installments to us at no interest. She was ecstatic. I have a good feeling that she will pay us back. But that is not important. The crucial thing is that there was someone at our door in need and we showed compassion.

As we approach Easter, let us be mindful of the compassion that Christ showed for us by giving of his life for our sins so that we might escape the downward spiral of spiritual poverty and experience a new life.

Amen.